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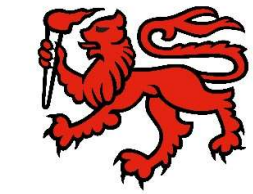

UNIVERSITY *of* TASMANIA

Reading and Writing Dogs in Popular Romance Fiction

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the

degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Tasmania

October, 202**2**

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Dedication

For John, my own personal hero, who never wavered in his belief or pride in me,
and who supported me every step of the way.

And for my mother, Noela Flack, who inspired a lifelong love of learning
and taught me to reach for the stars.

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eleven-year-old fox terrier, who arrived as a foster after being found tied to a tree in a park but stayed and is now the self-appointed warrior-protector of the house and greeter of guests.

Also the dogs who died during my candidature: Reuben, aka Lord Reuben Noblenose, the blue and white, stubborn, entitled, snuggly greyhound, who came into his own with us. 'His own' turned out to be lord of all he surveyed, especially beds. Reuben died at age 13. Ava, aka Princess Ava of Greylandia, the strawberry blonde greyhound who was my BFF. I miss her dinner dances, her demands for a portion of all baked goods, her judgemental glares, and sharing my pillow at night as we slept. Ava died at age 15. Twiggy, aka Dame Twiggy Velvetears, the brindle greyhound who suffered terribly at the hands of the racing industry and beyond. Then, her first loving home (with Alfie) was short-lived as her human entered a nursing home. Through it all, Twiggy was unbelievably trusting, and gave the sweetest hand licks. Twiggy died at age 15. Dougal Daryl Langtry, the border collie who knew he was a fine-looking dog, had maturity beyond his years, and never met a ball he didn't love. Doogie died age 15 but lives on as Zeb in the creative artefact of this thesis.

And our fosters during my candidature: Cindy, the eleven-year-old black greyhound with a gorgeous arched snout who died in 2017 during surgery (which the autopsy found was due to heart damage from narcotics). She loved soft beds, affection, and despite being almost blind, adored trotting along in the middle of our pack. The tragedy of waiting eleven years for rescue and having less than two weeks of it is only slightly mitigated by having those ten days overflowing with comfort and love. Dora, the eight-year-old black greyhound with a white face who threw herself into her new life like a border collie. It was our absolute privilege to spend a few months teaching her about pet life and then deliver her to her forever home. Sophie, the ten-year-old honey-brown, deaf staffie who needed a new home after her human escaped a domestic violence situation. Her ability to learn hand signals and live her life to the full inspired Willow in the creative artifact of this thesis.

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ABSTRACT

Genre fiction has enormous potential to reflect and influence human perception of non-human animals. This thesis examines the biggest selling of all popular genres—romance fiction—and the non-human species with whom humans form some of their closest relationships: dogs. Dog characters abound in popular romance fiction. As romance is fundamentally concerned with exploring love and relationships, this genre provides authors with an ideal canvas to craft the dog characters with whom the genre's protagonists form relationships, some fleeting, others fundamental to their story. Yet, within this boundless opportunity lies the risk of portraying dogs as flat character types and cliches, anthropomorphized and stripped of their canine identity, or merely as props, not granted the status of "characters." This thesis provides a model to guide the construction of canine characters that are as complex and individual as dogs in the ordinary world. It urges writers to approach dog characters with as much creative care as their stories' human characters. The model also provides scholars with a framework to read fictional dogs as characters in their own right, beyond metaphors and anthropocentric analyses.

The thesis comprises a creative artefact and an exegesis, which work together to respond to the overarching research question: how do we write non-human animals, specifically dogs, as fully formed and nuanced characters in popular romance, a genre anchored in the prioritisation of human agents? The exegesis mobilises theoretical debate and research from three areas of scholarship: one established field, narratology; and two relatively new fields, animal studies and popular romance studies. The site where any two of these fields overlap is an area of limited scholarship, and the site where all three overlap is the gap where my research seeks to make an original contribution to knowledge, including specialist knowledge that informs creative practice. The arguments are anchored in the collection and

analysis of a corpus of one hundred popular romance works, interrogated closely and comparatively to reveal and critique current practice in the construction of dog characters.

In the exegesis, I propose a model for reading and writing fictional dogs, specifically those in popular romance novels. The functionality of the model is twofold. First, it can be deployed as a lens for the analysis of dog characters. Secondly, it is intended as a tool for writers when they create dog characters, within and beyond the genre of focus here. The model demonstrates that the choices a writer makes when constructing a dog character determine the dog's position on a spectrum of a developed—undeveloped character. Writers' decisions are made across six primary dimensions: name, appearance, breed, backstory, gender, and age. Each dimension may be either present or absent in the text and, if present, contains coded information or other associated cues that signal the possibility of complexity. The sum of the authorial decisions across the six dimensions can be mapped, giving a visual analysis of the dog character's embedded potential for complexity.

The thesis's creative work is a popular romance novel titled *Wherever You Are*, which tests and elaborates on the theoretical arguments presented in the exegesis. For this practice-led research, I crafted thirteen dog characters, each occupying different spaces on the developed / undeveloped spectrum and containing a different level of embedded potential. As a research endeavour, the creative artefact blurs the lines between the construction of human and non-human animal characters across the six dimensions of the model. Taken together, the exegetical framework and the creative artefact build new knowledge about the construction of dog characters in the popular romance genre.

INTRODUCTION

In 2016 I was writing a romance novel contracted to Harlequin, which would later be published as *Tempted by the Wrong Twin*. I was struggling with the work when a friend said, "Why don't you add a dog? You love writing dogs." She was right, and so I did. Frank, a depressed chocolate Labrador, entered the novel and I found myself engaged with the story again. At the same time, I was negotiating with my future PhD supervisor about the topic of my proposed candidature. For over thirty years I had been involved in animal welfare and animal rights, through work on committees, fostering high-needs dogs, and other forms of activism, and so the possibility of researching how to write dog characters held immense appeal. Two of my great loves are dogs and romance novels, but, as both a reader and a writer, I'd found that when they intersect—dog characters in romance novels—the results are hit and miss. To me, having been involved in the lives of hundreds of dogs in a multitude of ways, dogs are individual souls, with their own personalities, preferences, and agency. Yet in fiction, dogs often appear as flat character types and cliches, sometimes anthropomorphized, which strips them of their canine identity, or treated merely as props, not even allowed the status of 'character.' Sam Cadman calls us to question "how effectively the [fictional] animal represents an individual, embodied subjectivity" (173). This call echoes my own writing challenge with Frank and others: to construct canine characters that are as complex and individual as dogs in the ordinary world, and to treat the dog character with as much creative care as the story's human characters. This personal writing challenge seeded the central research question of my thesis: how can we write non-human animals, specifically dogs, as fully formed and nuanced characters in popular romance, a genre anchored in the prioritisation of human agents? The popular romance genre foregrounds the explorations of relationships, which often includes relationships between human and non-human animals,

and this makes it a useful vehicle to examine representations of dogs and to inform new tools for constructing dog characters.

The thesis comprises a creative artefact and an exegesis, which work together to respond to the overarching research question. The exegesis mobilises theoretical debate and research from three areas of scholarship: one established field, narratology; and two relatively new fields, animal studies and popular romance studies. In the exegesis, I propose a model for reading and writing fictional dogs, specifically those in popular romance novels. The thesis's creative component is a popular romance novel titled *Wherever You Are*, which tests and elaborates on the theoretical arguments presented in the exegesis. Taken together, the exegetical framework and the creative artefact build new knowledge about the construction of dog characters in the popular romance genre.

This introduction briefly outlines the three fields of scholarship which inform my research: narratology, literary animal studies, and popular romance studies, and identifies the gaps in each field that my project seeks to address. I then present my original contribution to knowledge, a new model of dog character construction specifically built for popular romance fiction, but readily adaptable to other genres. My model is anchored in close and comparative textual analysis of a large sample of romance novels featuring dog characters, informed by wide engagement with scholarship from relevant (and sometimes disparate) fields, and worked out at the level of detail through a full-length work of creative writing. The introduction concludes with an overview of the exegesis.

Narratology has a long history of interrogating character through the use of dichotomies and models. For example, in E. M. Foster's seminal *Aspects of the Novel*, he contends that "[w]e may divide characters into flat and round" (67). Flat characters can be summed up in a single sentence, and their actions all stem from this single character statement, whereas round characters are "not tethered to" (77) their qualities and are "capable

of surprising in a convincing way" (78). Paul Pickrel's response to Forster, although not widely taken up, presents another dichotomy—that of essentialist and existentialist characters, which is "not a difference between kinds of people but between modes of perceiving them" (196). In Pickrel's model, the essentialist character "is to be looked at" while the existentialist character "is to be felt with" (183). More recently, John Frow has argued that "[t]hrough that process of attribution of qualities character takes the form of a semantic cluster, accumulating (progressively or discontinuously, coherently or incoherently) through the course of a text" (24). His book, *Character and Person*, examines character through exploring "the dimensions of this complex conceptual entity" (26). The seven dimensions Frow identifies as the building blocks are interest (or "the affective work that is done by the fictional character" (32)), person (or the dependence of the character on its status as a human being (33)), type, voice, name, face, and body. H. Porter Abbot's theory of character inserts the reader into his model, arguing that:

> we also perform the narrative operations of filling in other gaps, and of *overreading* and *underreading*, just as we do with the people we encounter in our lives. The model, then, for the construction of character in fictional narrative might look something like this:
>
> reader/viewer + narrative → reader/viewer's construction of a character. (134)

Influential studies of character, such as those of Foster and Frow, may diverge on ideas of character construction, but they are consistently anthropocentric, with some ideas (such as Frow's dimension of "person") explicitly excluding non-human animals. In addition, this scholarship has a strong bias towards literary fiction, rarely engaging seriously or at any length with popular genres such as romance, crime, or fantasy. These two gaps form the site of my research interest.

Literary animal studies is a relatively new and burgeoning field, which gained momentum in the early twenty-first century. It formed in reaction to the anthropocentric history of literary studies—as Susan McHugh claims, "literary institutions are set up to be inauspicious places for the investigation of shared human-animal stories" (*Stories* 16). Similarly, Jennifer McDonell argues that the concerns animal studies raise "necessitates a radical rethinking of core concepts that are often taken for granted in literary studies" (6), and, when Erica Fudge discusses the impact of the 'animal turn' on scholarship, she notes: "[t]hinking changes when it includes animals" (6). The stakes are high for dogs and other non-human animals. As Sherryl Vint argues, "[h]ow we think about animals affects how we live with them, and how we live with them determines who they are, socially and biologically" (8). In 2005, Marion Copeland and Kenneth Shapiro called for a "a full-blown, animal-based interpretative theory", saying:

> Whether they have a lead or two-bit part, a major presence or a presence striking by its absence, we can approach any work from a critical perspective in which the treatment of nonhuman animals is the operative analytic frame. No less than feminist, Marxist, post-colonial, structuralist, and formalist approaches, a literary criticism perspective on animal issues is a point of view, a form of consciousness, a way to read any work of fiction. (343)

They went on to present three goals: first, to "deconstruct reductive, disrespectful ways of presenting nonhuman animals"; second, to "evaluate the degree to which the author presents the animal 'in itself,' both as an experiencing individual and as a species-typical way of living in the world"; and, third, to analyse the "human–animal relationships in the work at hand" (345). My research responds to this call, by providing a model grounded in narratology, which also considers the dog character through the lens of Copeland and Shapiro's first two goals. Further, my model shifts the discussion from its literary fiction

focus. Popular fiction has not been entirely neglected by animal studies: when Vint asserted the role of literature "to convey new insight into animal being and potentially to reconfigure human-animal social relations" (8) she was introducing a collection of science fiction stories, and animal studies scholar Christy Tidwell uses close reading of two historical romance novels to examine the relationship between the human and non-human. McHugh's influential *Animal Stories* has chapters on detective fiction and 'Girl-Horse Stories.' However, beyond these few examples, genre fiction largely remains unexamined. My project foregrounds the biggest selling of all popular genres—romance fiction (Fletcher et al. 997)—and a non-human species with whom humans form some of their closest relationships—dogs.

Popular romance studies is also a young field of scholarship—the first conference of the International Association of the Study of Popular Romance was held in 2009 and the Journal of Popular Romance Studies began in 2010.[1] Given its youth, it is unsurprising that there is no consensus on a theoretical framework through which to approach a romance novel. In "Literary Approaches," Eric Murphy Sellinger notes the lack of popular romance scholarship that uses a close reading framework. He argues for "approaches to popular romance that are 'literary' in the sense that they emphasize what are still generally thought of as literary qualities or attributes of texts, no matter their genre or medium" (295). One influential model for close reading is provided by Pamela Regis in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. She identifies "the eight essential elements of the romance novel" (29), which are primarily plot-based events, such as 'the meeting' and 'the barrier.' Like literary animal studies, popular romance studies rarely narrows the lens to focus closely on the process of character construction, and, like narratology, it is firmly anthropocentric.[2] Yet,

[1] For an overview of the history of popular romance studies, see Selinger and Frantz.

[2] An exception is O'Mahony, who examines how one novel addresses "contemporary gender, environmental and animal rights issues in rural Australia" (1) through the narrative and representations of working dogs.

non-human animals, such as horses, cats, and other domestic and farmyard animals, abound in popular romance fiction—with none more prolific than dogs. As romance is fundamentally concerned with telling stories of love and relationships, the genre provides authors with an ideal canvas to craft dog characters with whom the protagonists form relationships, some fleeting, others fundamental to their story. My model of dog character construction in romance novels stretches the field to encompass non-human species, providing for the first time a framework for close textual reading of animals in the genre.

My research sits at the intersection of these three fields: narratology, literary animal studies and popular romance studies. The site where any two of these fields overlap is an area of limited scholarship, and the site where all three overlap is the gap where my research seeks to make an original contribution to knowledge, including specialist knowledge that informs creative practice. In this thesis, I mobilise scholarship from all three fields as I undertake the first comprehensive interrogation of dog characters in popular romance fiction. The result is a model of character construction that provides insight into and analysis of dog characters in romance novels. The core principle of my model is that the choices a writer makes, especially within the confines of genre, embed various levels of potential, which leads to a fictional dog who falls somewhere on a spectrum from undeveloped to fully developed. For this project, I define a developed dog character as one who has distinguishing traits, character complexity, agency, the capacity to surprise, relationships with other characters, and involvement in their story's plot. The model examines the dog character across six dimensions: names, appearance, breed, backstory, gender, and age, and explicates levels of complexity within (and between) each dimension. Use of the model reveals a holistic potential for every dog character that can be mapped across the dimensions (a worked example is provided in conclusion). That is, my model of dog character construction combines the narratological concerns of character construction processes with the animal studies sensibility of

foregrounding the non-human animal in a respectful and considered way, within the context of popular romance novels. The model works in an author-centric (or creative writing-centric) modality, offering choices to writers when creating a dog character, as well as a reader-centric modality, as a close reading framework.

This project utilizes a mixed methodological approach. I call on scholarship from all three fields mentioned above, as well as drawing from the scientific study of animals, including disciplines such as ethology and canine cognitive science (with a particular debt to the work of Alexandra Horowitz) to tie the fictional dogs as closely as possible to real dogs, and to explore the key attributes that humans find appealing about dogs in the ordinary world. Additionally, textual analysis across a corpus of one hundred romance novels provides valuable insight into published dog characters and the choices authors have made. The final component of the methodology is practice-led research in the form of a creative work. Given the research question covers writing as well as reading dog characters, the use of a practice-led research strategy is a vital component—insights on creative writing are best gained through the act of writing. This multi-faceted methodology allows the research question to be approached simultaneously from several angles, leading to a more thorough and rigorous examination of the topic.

The arguments made in this thesis are anchored in the collection and analysis of a corpus of one hundred Anglophone popular romance works (see Appendix A), interrogated closely and comparatively to reveal and critique current practice in the construction of dog characters. One hundred works is a manageable size for an exegesis of this length, while still allowing a panoramic view of the genre. When I had read one hundred works, with many more options still before me, I realised I could set limits (see below) and still easily fill the corpus. There are likely thousands of works of popular romance fiction that include a dog character, with more continuing to be published. Across the works there were 155 dog

characters analysed (see Appendix B). Popular romance novels comprise the most commercially successful fiction genre in the English-speaking world, and when approaching this genre I take as my starting point the industry definition provided by the Romance Writers of America, which is generally adhered to by the industry. This definition has two key features, "a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" (RWA website). Each work in the corpus meets these criteria, as well as five project-specific criteria:

1. the work must have been published in 1995 or later to ensure the contemporary relevance of my findings
2. the dog character appears in at least three scenes
3. a maximum of two books from any one series (such as Rachel Lacey's Love to the Rescue series focusing on a boxer rescue group), as a safeguard against one series biasing the findings toward certain breeds or other features
4. all dogs were representative of "real" domestic dogs (*Canis familiaris*), that is, no enhanced or cyborg dogs, magic or mythical creatures, which necessitated the exclusion of all romantic speculative fiction subgenres (such as paranormal romance, urban fantasy, science fiction romance, etc)[3]

[3] Additionally, canine characters in paranormal romance are more likely to be wolves (*Canis lupus*) or werewolves than domestic dogs (*Canis lupus familiaris*), and, as Coppinger and Coppinger write, "[d]ogs may well be closely related to wolves but that does not mean they behave like wolves. People are closely related to chimps but that doesn't […] mean we behave like chimps" (24). The differences between dogs and wolves are significant enough that they are not interchangeable as characters, nor can an examination of wolves shed light on dog characters. Range and Marshall-Pescini note that: "Domestic animals differ from their wild ancestors in physiological, morphological, and behavioral traits, including reduced brain size, depigmentation, altered size and shape of ears and tails, altered estrous cycles, as well as changes in concentrations of adrenocorticotropic hormones and neurotransmitters. At the behavioral level, domestic animals are thought to be less fearful of humans and more socially tolerant of conspecifics (e.g., less aggressive)" (338).

5. all works were set in the present time, to allow focus on modern ideas of the dogs and their place in the world, which excluded all subgenres of historical romance

Within these parameters, the corpus has variation in several ways. The length of the works ranges from novellas through to full-length novels. The corpus also pulls in novels across the two main forms of romance fiction: category romance[4] and single title romance.[5] There is also diversity in the method of publishing, including books from the traditional 'Big 5' publishers, such as Hachette and Macmillan, smaller publishing houses, such as Entangled Publishing and Tule Publishing, and independent / self-published works. The corpus also contains diversity in settings, including stories set, for example, in Australia, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom, although the bulk of the corpus is set in the USA, which reflects the romance market. Finally, there is variation across romance subgenres, such as small-town contemporary, urban contemporary, romantic comedy, romantic suspense, rural romance, inspirational (Christian romance), and romances that bordered on women's fiction; as well as across heat levels (the degree of sexually explicit content, from "closed bedroom door" to "steamy" texts). This level of variation ensures that the corpus is reflective of romance fiction in the current Anglophone market.

I have included three of my own commercially published novels in the corpus to claim my space as both a researcher and a popular romance fiction author, and as a declaration that I am a part of the culture and industry which is, both consciously and subconsciously, producing the dog characters critiqued in this project. This act also puts three

[4] "books issued under a common imprint/series name that are usually numbered sequentially and released at regular intervals, usually monthly, with the same number of releases each time" (Romance Writers of America website).

[5] "longer romances released individually and not as part of a numbered series" (Romance Writers of America website).

of my past dog characters on the record as a comparison with the dog characters in the thesis creative work.

The final component of the project is a piece of practice-led research. The novel *Wherever You Are* is a work of romance fiction which is of commercially publishable standard in terms of the genre's expectations in length, style, and plot. This creative artifact experiments with thirteen dog characters, each of which falls into a different location on the developed / undeveloped spectrum and therefore contains a different level of embedded potential. The work seeks to blur the lines between human and non-human animal characters through deliberate testing and application of the model produced in this project.

My model of dog character construction consists of six primary dimensions. During the creation of this model, I experimented with other elements, such as character types (building on folk taxonomies of dog types) and voice (a dog character's propensity and capacity for communication), but as the work progressed I found that my initial list could be broken down and/or merged into these basic building blocks: the six primary dimensions of a dog character. Each primary dimension may be either present or absent in the text and, if present, may contain coded information or have other associated cues that signal the possibility of complexity. These six dimensions are presented in the six chapters of the exegesis.

Chapter 1 explores names, a dimension which has multiple facets, including its location within the naming system, the choice of a specific name, and the use of nicknames. This element comes to the foreground when other characters perform naming and renaming acts, sometimes in collaboration with the dog character itself. This section argues that naming a dog character is a performative act that brings the dog character into being, and that the name itself contains layers of encoded meaning.

Chapter 2 examines the appearance of dog characters, with particular emphasis on the features humans find appealing, such as eyes, ears, and coat colour, and demonstrates that they enact a coded language of meaning for interpreting personality traits. Further, a major component of the coded language is the attractiveness or unattractiveness of the dog: attractiveness increases the possibility of reader attachment, and unattractiveness frees the dog from expectations to perform[6] "dog" in appealing or expected ways, and therefore activates the possibility of character complexity.

Chapter 3 argues that a dog's breed does more work than any other element in establishing its character through both the purebred/mutt dichotomy and the choice of specific breed, and that choices around a dog character's breed carry risks as well as opportunities for the dog character.

Chapter 4 explores a dog character's backstory, with particular focus on the inclusion of—or speculation about—a complex, distinctive history before first appearing on the page. Further, this chapter argues that a backstory that grants internal conflict is the key indicator that a fictional dog will have character growth.

Chapter 5 focuses on the element of gender. It reveals the disparity between the gender groups of dog characters and positions these results in the broader context of gender representation in fiction.

Chapter 6 takes up the age of a dog character and argues that phase of life impacts the dog's potential complexity and embedded potential in areas such as their appeal to humans, the roundness of their personality, their capacity to take on formal and informal roles, and the space available in their past for backstory.

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[6] In this exegesis, I refer to the dog characters "performing" traits, such as "performing gender" and "performing dog." I ascribe the agency in these performances to the author, who creates a dog who, for example, performs gender in ways that conform to societies expectations. For simplicity, however, I use the phrasing of the dog character's performance.

These dimensions work on an individual level and in concert with the other primary dimensions, allowing a dog character's traits to be mapped across the model. In the conclusion, several example maps are presented for characters from both the corpus and the creative work, and one dog character from the corpus is analysed in more depth before mapping to demonstrate the application of the model.

The principal work of this thesis is to foreground the process of character construction for dogs in popular romance fiction. Not all dog characters will be, or need to be, well developed—some, as for some human characters, will necessarily have minor roles. However, to treat fictional dogs with as much respect as their fictional human counterparts requires that the dog character's level of development arises from authorial choices and not from the default options for non-human animals. The model provided in this thesis offers a framework for those choices to be both undertaken and analysed.

1: NAMES

"You look like a Katie": Performatives and Codes within a Name

Introduction

The foundation stone in the construction of a dog character in popular romance novels is their name. Naming creates meaning in two ways: through the very existence of a name and through the codes within that name. The first function, the existence of the name, is the outcome of the authorial performative act of naming the dog character, which brings the possibilities of that character into being. The second function is one of load-bearing—the dog character's name carries coded meanings, which signal details about how the character should be read.

It is not new to stress the capacity of a fictional character's name to carry information. Catherine Gallagher, for example, argues that we "put more interpretive pressure on proper names in novels than we do in life, for we take them as intentional cues to different modes of reading" (353). Michael Ragussis argues "the entire tradition of the novel exposes the way in which personal names function not as neutral referents but as labels of meaning—for the other characters in the text … and for the reader" (244). The meaning encoded into names has multiple facets, from its location within systems of dog-naming practices, to the choice of a specific name and whether it has multiple versions via nicknames. Further meaning can be created through other characters performing the act of naming or renaming within the text.

Extant scholarship, however, centres on human characters. I argue that the interpretive pressure is as strong for dog characters' names as it is for human characters' names, yet there are differences between naming as it applies to the two species. Dogs' names are drawn from a wider array of categories, have to work harder against the default position of deindividualization, and are more commonly used in naming and renaming acts than humans'

names. This section examines the naming of a dog characters—a performative act within the text—the interpretative possibilities activated, and the layers of encoded meaning in the name itself.

Naming as Performative Act

Names are commonly one of the first pieces of information a reader discovers about a character, although significantly not all dogs in fiction are named. While it is true that unnamed human characters appear in fiction, the default condition of non-human animals is one of deindividualization, which gives greater significance to the naming of dog characters.

In some instances, as with human characters, non-naming is simply an indicator that a dog character is minor. The puppies Nina is shown at the shelter in Jennifer Crusie's *Anyone but You*, moments before she notices the dog she will adopt, are left unnamed. These puppies are what Adrienne L. McLean refers to, in her introduction to *Cinematic Canines*, as "bits and extras" and therefore do not need names to perform their role in the narrative. In some novels, dog characters appear in a group and are too numerous to name individually. In Marion Lennox's *Mardie and The City Surgeon*, many dogs attend the funeral of a small-town dog trainer:

> They formed a guard of honour, all the way from the church door to the graveyard at the foot of the hill where he stood.
>
> A man or woman or child was suddenly standing every step of the way, on either side of the path where the coffin was carried. And beside each man, woman and child…
>
> A dog. Not just a dog, but a trained dog. Mostly working dogs—collies, kelpies, blue heelers, but the occasional poodle, spaniel, mutt.

> Every dog was sitting hard on his owner's heels, rigidly to attention, eyes straight in front as the coffin passed, a last and loving respect to the man who'd spent his life training them. Who'd passed on his skills from dog to dog, from generation to generation. (225)

The sheer number of dogs in this scene means, in Alex Woloch's terms, they are not individual characters that "command attention as a qualitatively distinct being" but are part of a "quantitative unit, absorbed into a larger number" whose effect on the scene is via the unit's size and uniform behaviour. Woloch identifies a "fault line" where the "distinction between counting and naming occurs" (5), and the dogs in Lennox's funeral scene have crossed that line, rendering them nameless. Their nameless state is in service to the goal of the passage—to use the size of their "quantitative unit" to illustrate the effect of the dog trainer on the town.

Others again may be unnamed to suit the requirements of the story, such as the two neglected boxers that Cara and her friend monitor and eventually rescue in Rachel Lacey's *Unleashed*. The lack of contact with the boxers' owner gives no opportunity to learn their names, and their nameless state in the text adds another layer of neglect. For dog cognitive scientist Alexandra Horowitz, "[n]ot naming is the pinnacle of disinterest" (*Inside* 296). This also holds for the writers of fiction, where leaving a dog character unnamed cues the reader to pay less attention, as with the shelter puppies in *Anyone but You*, or to recognize that other characters lack interest in the dog, as with the neglected boxers in *Unleashed*.

In each of these cases, the lack of name means the possibilities of these "bits and extras" as characters are never fully realized. Unlike other dogs in the texts cited above, such as Fred in *Anyone but You*, Bessie in *Mardie and the City Surgeon* or Sadie in *Unleashed*, the puppies, working dogs and neglected boxers have not been subject to the authorial performative act of naming (or, at least, the reader was not witness to it), and they remain

elements of unrealised potential. For Fred, Bessie and Sadie, their name removes a degree of distance and otherness within the text, bringing them into the fold of the character system. The granting of a name transforms these dogs into characters rather than living props.

Ragussis posits that "[i]n most cultures one of the primary functions of human names is to order the flux of the generations by bringing the new individual inside the cultural system. In our culture this is managed through family name" (7). The majority of dog characters don't have a family name; however, dogs' individual names themselves signal their place inside the human family and cultural systems. Non-human animals that are not named are frequently excluded from these systems, and are at a higher risk of being treated as food, tools or vermin. As Stanley Brandes points out, unlike pets, various species of cattle and barnyard animals are rarely given names in the real world ("Dear Rin Tin Tin" 6), and this pattern is reflected in the corpus novels. The two main dog characters in *Mardie and the City Surgeon* are both named, and the unnamed dogs (and humans) in the funeral scene above are presumed to have names off-page, yet the members of a flock of sheep which also form part of the story remain unnamed. In contrast to the dogs, the sheep are not treated by the text as even minor characters but as elements of setting. Similarly, the cattle in the opening scene of Nikki Logan's *Slow Dance with the Sheriff* are an unnamed mass beside the dog character, Deputy, also introduced in this scene. To follow Ragussis, the lack of names excludes the sheep and cattle from family and cultural systems, whereas the named dog characters are granted that privilege. Sune Borkfelt asserts that giving a non-human animal a name "can make us think about it as an individual, a person" (121), which for dogs in fiction is a step in constructing their character. Indeed, John Frow claims in *Character and Person* that he "takes the process of nomination" to be a "central condition for the existence and recognition of fictional character" (34). Therefore, when reading dog characters in popular romance novels, a name is the first indication that the dog has been created to be a character in the

story, significant enough that it will be referred to directly. As Yvonne Bertillis states, "[w]hen the proper name of the character is expressed" it is easier for the "reader to empathize with the character" (48). Unlike the members of the "unit" of dogs in the funeral guard of honour in *Mardie and the City Surgeon*, or the cattle in *Slow Dance with the Sheriff*, named dog characters are the recipients of an authorial performative act. In popular romance fiction, naming the dog character brings the diegetic potential of the character into being.

Naming Systems

Beyond the distinction of being present, the location of that name within the system of dog-naming practices reveals much about the dog character and how it is to be read. In studies of dog-naming in contemporary America, researchers have found that since the 1980s the largest single category of names given to dogs is human names (both everyday names and famous humans) (e.g. Brandes, "Gravestones" 105).[7] In "Dear Rin Tin Tin" Brandes used a list of nearly 12000 dog names that people sent in 1985 to a *New York Times* columnist William Safire, as well as Safire's own groupings, to suggest thematic categories of names, including descriptive names, foods, and emotional dispositions (4-5). Scholars generally agree that both the rise in human names for dogs and the current dominance of that naming system is reflective of the status of dogs as family. Ernest Abel, for example, suggests that pets living inside the home are more likely to have human names than those living outside, such as horses, and, of the pets within the home, those which roam free, such as dogs, are more likely again to have a human name than those in a cage, such as birds. He further suggests that since dogs and cats roam free in the home and are often fed human food, they

[7] This pattern, however, may only be reflective of popular romance novels written in English. As Frow writes, "[n]aming practices are never unsystematic but vary sharply from culture to culture" (181). Lindsay Chen found that dog naming practices in Taiwan followed a vastly different pattern, with the focus on reduplication, food references and markers of endearment rather than human names.

are "considered members of the family to a greater extent than other pet species and hence are more likely to be given human names than are other species" (352). A key difference in the naming practices of dog and human characters is that human characters, by and large, are given human names, but the names of dog characters are drawn from an array of categories. Building on previous research, especially that of Brandes, I have created a list of thematic categories of dog names for use in this project: human names, human-related names, food, physical description, emotional state, and famous / mythical / other species of non-human animals.

The majority of dog characters in the romance novels studied (see fig. 1) have human names (61%), such as Violet in *Once in a Blue Moon* and Fred in *Anyone but You*. A subset within the human names category (12% of total sample) have the name of a famous historical or fictional human, such as Batman in Sandra Antonelli's *Next to You*. An associated group is human-related names, which covers occupations, endearments, and titles, such as Deputy in *Slow Dance with the Sheriff* and Prince in Catherine Mann's *Home for Christmas* (7%). Five percent are named for famous, mythical, or other species of non-human animals, such as Cerberus in Amy Andrews's *Holding Out for a Hero* and Jaws in Nora Roberts's *The Search*. Of those without human or famous dog names, one group are given a name which refers to their physical characteristics (physical description 8%): e.g. Blue the blue heeler in Kelly Hunter's *Wish*. Another group is named after food (10%)—for example, Truffle in Stefanie London's *The Aussie Next Door*—and the last category had a name which corresponded to a mood or emotional disposition (11%), including Mojo in *Unleashed* and Fizz in Myrna Mackenzie's *The Soldier, the Puppy and Me*. This analysis reveals that romance authors are consciously or subconsciously participating in society's dominant system of naming dogs, and that the overwhelming majority of dogs in the corpus have a human name.

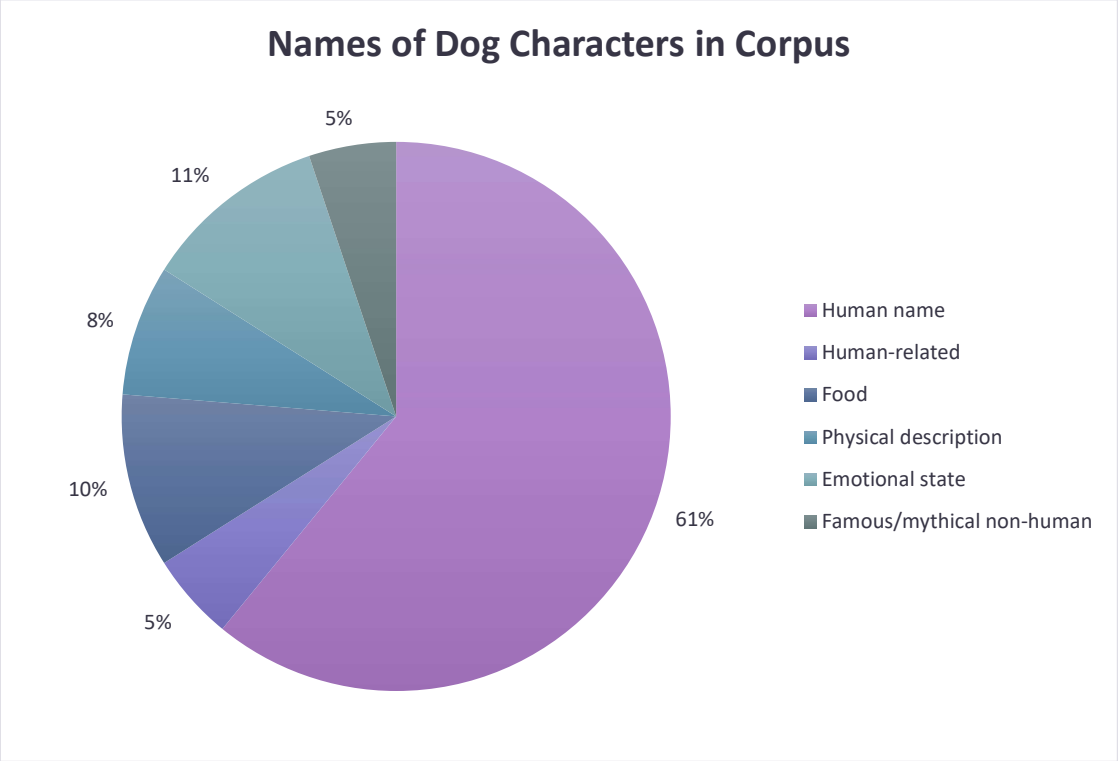

Fig. 1. Categories of dog character names in corpus works.

Human names are doing more than acknowledging family status—they are a recognition of their bearer's inner complexity and individual subjectivity. Christina Lupton observes that "[e]arly in *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt identifies a single element of the eighteenth-century novel as an exemplary innovation, namely 'the way that the novelist typically indicates his intention of presenting a character as a particular individual by naming him in exactly the same way as particular individuals are named in ordinary life'" (1213). This progression, Lupton explains, both reflects the change in the characters themselves (moving from character 'types' to characters with more complexity), and also cues the reader to the change. As she goes on to state, "[t]he change in the way characters are named corresponds to a change in the way they are read" (1214). Marking the progress of fictional characters from simple to complex through granting ordinary names parallels the shift in bestowing human names for animals as our view of them changes. Borkfelt writes that "as we

have, historically, come to regard other animals with greater complexity (and consider, for instance, that they might be able to think or feel), it has become more common to use human names for them" (122). It appears that for both fictional (human) characters and for dogs in the real world, being in possession of an ordinary human name both recognises and signals that there is more below the surface—there is an inner complexity. The nexus of these groups—a fictional dog—which is also in possession of an ordinary human name is a cue to the reader that this character has the possibility of development.

Choice of Specific Name

To the popular romance fiction writer, one value of the name's capacity to carry coded information is its efficiency. Naming a dog character Twinkles suggests that s/he will be deployed for comedy value, and indeed, tiny Twinkles the foster dog in Jill Shalvis's *Animal Magnetism* is frequently used as a source of humour. Similarly, in *For Keeps* the hero encounters an aggressive dog at a veterinarian's clinic. He remarks on the encounter to the vet:

> "That kid with the vicious dog is a client of yours?"
>
> "His father is, but he's out of town. Brutus isn't all bad, but the family refuses to have him neutered, and he gets a little territorial around other dogs."
>
> "Brutus? The dog's name is Brutus? That should be a warning right there." (8)

The hero's comment directly references the information in the name—that the owner likely wanted an aggressive dog and may have encouraged this behaviour—revealing the immediate legibility of some naming codes.

Gallagher points to the ability of a fictional name to "carry quite a bit of information in social life; they are associated with region, gender, ethnic group, class status, even (in the case of given names) social ambitions, as well as family history; they generally, that is,

contain the social coordinates of individual identity" (352). Dog names have a comparable capacity to carry this information. Research by Ernest Abel and Michael Kruger shows that dog names also carry gender information, specifically that male dog names have fewer syllables than female names, and that the last syllable of both male and female dog names end in the same letters as the names of their human counterparts (61). Brandes comments:

> The selection of a name for one's dog wittingly or unwittingly communicates information about feelings the owner holds for his or her place in society. . . .That name, as [the owners] well know, is a condensation of who they as owners are, how they want to be seen by those around them, and their conformity or not to social convention and the fashions of the times. ("Dear Rin Tin Tin" 13)

The ability of the dog's name to communicate information about the owner is an effect utilized by authors. Compare Blue, owned by cowboy Adam in *Wish* to Einstein, Heisenberg, and Maxwell, owned by Lucy the high school teacher in Crusie's *Getting Rid of Bradley*. As Brandes writes, "[t]he choice of companion animal and the bestowal of its name are . . . vehicles of communication and self-identity for the owner" ("Dear Rin Tin Tin" 12), and the self-identity of Adam and Lucy are apparent in their choice of names for their dogs.

The category within the naming system where the dog's name fits—human names, food, physical description, etc—often grants coded information. Six novels in the corpus involve a fostering / rescue group / shelter plot in which the heroine and/or hero are presented with multiple dogs to care for, and where at least one is kept and at least one is not. Analysis of the nineteen dog character names from those six novels reveals a pattern where the dogs with the human names are more likely to be the dog kept and the dogs named after food or emotional dispositions are more likely to move on to have a Happily Ever After with someone else (see fig. 2). In *For Keeps*, the heroine, Merry, names a foster dog Amber. The name is given to the reader in the context of a description of the dog's coat colour among

other colour-based options, which clearly lodges it within the descriptive category; however, it is a name which doubles as a human name. Merry has three dogs in her house already: her own dog, Ralf, and two foster dogs, Chip and Salsa. Her own dog's name also falls into the human name category and the foster dogs are both named for foods. The fact that this new foster dog is given a human name is a signal that Amber may play a bigger role than the dogs with food names. By the end of the novel, Chip and Salsa have found a home elsewhere, and Amber, who has played an important role in the plot, is adopted by Merry. In an epilogue, Merry greets her two dogs, Ralf and Amber, and "Tank—her newest, and somewhat oversized, foster" (323). Given that the newest foster has a descriptive name, the text intimates that Tank will be rehomed, unlike Amber, who was clearly marked as different to the other fosters from the start.

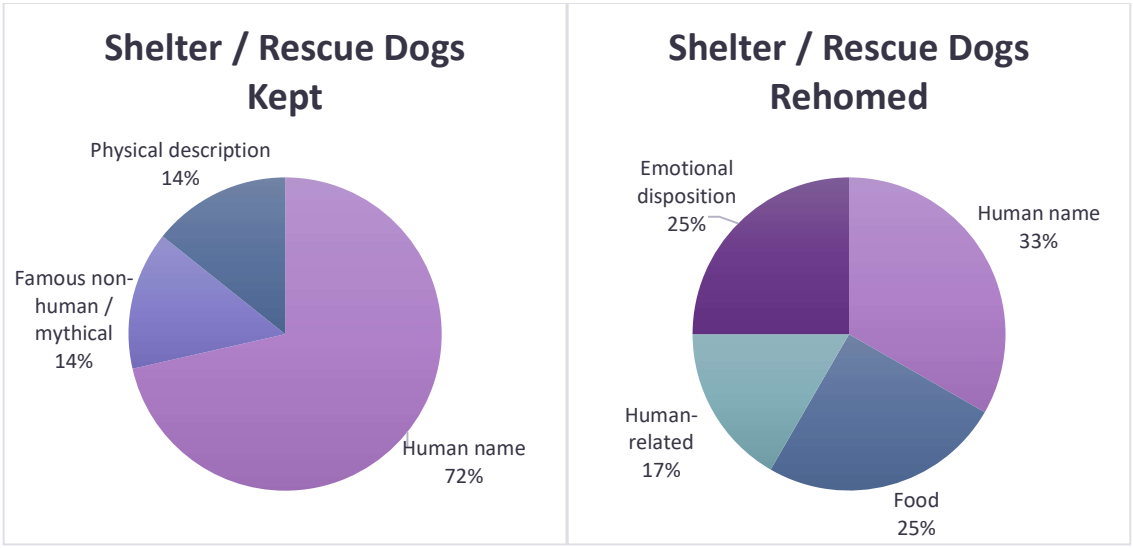

Fig. 2. Categories of dog character names in works with shelter/rescue plots: dogs kept (n=12) vs dogs rehomed (n=8).

The performative acts of naming that bring dog characters into being, then, are not equal. Amber's name signals the probability of a different narrative arc to those of Tank,

Ralf, Chip, Salsa, Brutus, or Twinkles. The encoded meanings in those names signal that these dog characters were created with different possibilities already implanted.

Nicknames

When the reader is introduced to the basset hound in Pamela Ford's *Dear Cordelia* and finds that the author has used a multifaceted naming system for the dog, consisting of a formal name—Cordelia Jane—as well as a more commonly used nickname—C.J.— and an occasional nickname—Ceej—several factors are at play. Ford's decision to devote space in the text to more than one form of the name, and the consequent requirement of the reader to remember more than one form, prompts the reader to engage with the dog character. Additionally, multiple forms of a name may indicate a more complex character. In his essay "Naming and the Character of African Fiction," D. S. Izevbaye proposes that only two systems of naming are adequate for "lifelike characters." The first is a neutral name, free of baggage, which allows "complex and unpredictable" characters to be constructed. The second is to use several names for the character.

> It is one way of acknowledging, through the use of multiple names, the hundred and one facets of the personality of individuals in different roles and with different motives, as is confirmed by our experience of actual people. (173)

Real persons are commonly referred to by more than one name, such as a family nickname, a shortening or lengthening of their name, or a formal and informal version of their name. Replicating this system in fictive worlds as part of building complex, lifelike characters is a technique utilized by authors for human characters.

Existing scholarship supports my own findings that a similar process applies to dogs. Brandes notes that nicknames for dogs in the real world are common and generally follow the same patterns as nicknames for humans, and they "tend to be shortened versions of the

official name, affectionate modifications of the official name, or a word that bears no phonetic relation to the official name, that is, a name based on a dog's looks, personality, or other individual characteristics" ("Dear Rin Tin Tin" 7). This system of producing nicknames is found in many books in the corpus, from Lynne Graham's *Bought for the Greek's Revenge,* which features Aurora, more commonly addressed as Rory, to Nikki Logan's *Awakened by his Touch,* which stars Wilbur, who is "Captain Furry-Pants to his friends" (21). The reflection of the real world's system of bestowing nicknames on dogs in fictive worlds—and, as Izevbaye noted, a system also used for human fictional characters—combined with the requirement of readers to invest extra attention in remembering the additional forms of the name, produces a textual cue that this is a character who is significant enough to be worthy of the reader's investment.

Naming Acts

At times in the corpus novels the reader is not only given the dog character's name but is also taken a step deeper to witness the moment the name is bestowed by another character. These instances have dual layers of performativity—the name has been bestowed both by the author as well as by a character. Frow suggests "[t]he act of naming may mark both a social birth and a social death that precedes it" (183), an argument with as much relevance to dogs as humans, particularly when seen through the frame that social births and deaths are often literal life and death issues for dogs. Significantly, naming acts are more common for dog characters than human characters. Across the corpus, new human babies and puppies are named as a matter of course in equal measures. There is an absence of naming acts for adult humans in the works of the corpus, however, naming acts for adult dogs are common—primarily for stray dogs and new adoptees.

The act of a character naming their dog is often the second significant moment in their human-canine relationship, after the initial adoption. Quinn McKenzie, the heroine in Crusie's *Crazy for You*, rescues a stray dog in the book's opening scene. There are several reasons it would be problematic for Quinn to keep the dog, yet she desperately wants to adopt her. The moment that it is clear to both Quinn and the reader that she is keeping the stray is the point in the text where she names her.

> Quinn patted her to slow her quivering and smiled. "You look like a Katie. K-K-K-Katie, just like the song. A pretty, skinny K-K-K-Katie." She bent closer and whispered, "My Katie," and the dog sighed her agreement and burrowed back to shiver into the dark warmth of Quinn's coat. (9)

This act of naming marks a social death and social birth for each character—Katie's life as a stray ends as her life as a pet begins, and it is also the death knell for Quinn's old life, as her boyfriend refuses to consider a dog, and her rental agreement precludes pets. Within the next few chapters Quinn leaves both the boyfriend and her apartment. Significantly, Quinn chooses a human name, an extra signal to the reader that this dog is now family, and further, the name is taken from a 1918 love song, "K-K-K-Katy". This naming act is layered with meaning: the act itself is a marker of Quinn's decision to keep the dog, which she is aware will be life-changing for them both, and her choice of a name is not only a human name, but one which is linked to love and devotion in Quinn's mind.

In some novels in the corpus the naming act goes beyond the bestowal of a name and becomes a more complex process. Izevbaye asserts that "naming is a creative act performed at birth or at christening ceremonies" (169). The context of a formal ceremony to frame a naming act for dogs is rare, yet many authors in the corpus novels construct scenes allowing the naming act to unfold in a way which is still true to the act's creative nature. In *For Keeps*, the heroine Merry runs a foster group for boxers. Her latest rescue is a stray Labrador cross

puppy, whom she initially refers to as No-Name. "'You need a name,' Merry told her. She named new fosters all the time, and yet, she couldn't bring herself to name this one" (12). Merry continues to refer to the puppy as No-Name for several days.

> No-Name slept in her bed on the floor. In the bedroom though, and that was progress. As early morning sun streamed through the window, Merry gazed at the brown mutt in the corner. She needed a name.
>
> "Sandy?" she said aloud, eyeing the golden fur. The dog kept her back turned.
>
> "Biscuit?" Nothing.
>
> "Taffy?" The dog sighed.
>
> "Amber?"
>
> She raised her head and looked at Merry with big, brown eyes.
>
> Merry pushed up on one elbow. "Amber? You like that?"
>
> The dog's tail gave a shy wag.
>
> "All right then. Amber it is." (35)

The difficulty Merry has in performing the naming act indicates its significance to her in the case of this particular dog. The reader is immediately cued—both by Merry's struggle to perform the naming act and the choice of a human name that is also descriptive—that Amber will likely have a larger role to play than Merry's other foster dogs, Chip and Salsa. The act itself is reinforced by the circumstances of a new morning, the sun shining in, and the fairy-tale-like repetition of names, which together create to a semi-ceremonial quality. Moreover, Merry's act of naming Amber is more than a simple choice—it involves trial and error and is a collaborative process between the human and dog characters. It is reminiscent of Horowitz's account of naming her dog in her nonfiction narrative *Inside of a Dog*:

> When trying out names for our dog, calling words out at her—"Bean!" "Bella!" "Blue!"—to see if any prompted a reaction, I felt that I was searching for "her name": the name that was already hers. With it, the bond between human and animal—wrought of understanding, not projection—could begin to form. (*Inside* 296)

Horowitz's experience of naming her family's dog aligns with many examples from the corpus, from its experimental nature to its collaborative process and its recognition of the outcome's significance. Of course, not every dog character in the corpus books is given, or is in need of, a naming act. However, the presence of a naming act in the text, and the weight it is given—both the process and the final product—combine to signal that this dog character is valuable to the narrative.

Renaming Acts

A device adjacent to naming acts, which is also rich with potential for dog characters, is the renaming act. Frow argues:

> The act of renaming signals a change of social status; … in marriage, at puberty, on joining a gang, by a cardinal on his election as Pope, by men or women undergoing a change of sex, during sickness, at the death of a relative when their hostile spirit may be seeking to seize on your name. (184)

The instances listed by Frow are, as far as we are aware, exclusive to humans. However, renaming acts for human characters appear in only a handful of works across the corpus—such as when Pixie and Apollo enter into a marriage of convenience in Lynne Graham's *The Greek's Christmas Bride* and she takes his surname—but never for a first name. When a dog character is the recipient of a renaming act in the corpus, it is for the first name. Additionally, in line with Frow's argument above, when a dog character is renamed during the plot it is often at a turning point for the human and dog, indicating a shift in their relationship and

status. When Evan Chance, the hero of Nancy Warren's *Kiss a Girl in the Rain,* hits a stray dog on his motorbike as he is passing through a small town, he takes the dog to the local doctor (the heroine). His motorbike needs repairs, so Evan is stuck in the town while waiting for parts to arrive, and tries to find the dog's home, but considers the dog "too ugly to be a pet" (41) and "the World's Homeliest Dog" (42), so nicknames him Homely. This name, which the dog retains for the majority of the novel, fits into the descriptive category mentioned above. After the novel's climax (when Evan returns to the town to claim Homely from the shelter where he'd left him, and to declare his love for the heroine, Caitlyn), a discussion is held about renaming the dog. The heroine puts "her foot down on calling a living creature Homely" (187) and tries a range of options to see if one elicits a reaction from the dog. Each name tested is a human one: Homer, Tony, Howie, and Henry. The dog responds to Henry, which Evan and Caitlyn chose as his name. This act of renaming the dog from Homely to Henry is symbolic of the dog moving from a temporary companion to a permanent part of the family, undergoing a change in his social status. The name itself switches from a descriptive name to a human name, with all the inference of family inclusion that it carries, deepening the symbolism of that renaming act. The Homely/Henry renaming act occurs near the end of *Kiss a Girl in the Rain* at the point of his social rebirth, and the renaming act releases Homely from the narrative path anticipated by "Homely". More generally, the power of renaming can be seen in the effects on the dog characters in the corpus and the change in the trajectories of their plots from that point.

Conclusion

Names are the foundation stone in the construction of a dog character, both in their performative ability to bring the character into being and in their load-bearing capacity for characters and readers alike. The author's choice of name and the encoded meanings that

brings, as well as their handling of the naming and/or renaming acts, embed varying levels of potential for complexity. Gallagher points to this deep layering process when she asserts, "Because we are conscious of their fictionality, novelistic names not only help us to sort characters into major and minor, round and flat, serious and comic but also prompt us to begin—or not to begin—the intense imaginative activity of reading character" (352). The coded information in names that Gallagher refers to, and the prompts to either engage with the character or to skim over it as an element of setting, are intrinsic elements as much for dog as for human characters. However, naming a dog character takes on heightened meaning as the default perspective for viewing non-human animals is that of deindividualization. There are similarities in the way names and naming works for dog and human characters, and also differences, such as the larger array of categories that the name can be drawn from and the higher incidence in naming and renaming acts. Most strikingly of all, a dog character who bears a human name, especially one who also has a nickname and/or receives a naming or renaming act during the the story, is one with the potential to become a developed character.

2: APPEARANCE

"She's not a lemon … she's *jolie laide*": Meaning and Coded Potential in Appearance.

Introduction

When considering any human-dog interaction, it is difficult to overstate the impact of the dog's appearance. In a study of almost 1500 adopters, Weiss et al. found that "[a]ppearance was cited most often as the single most important reason people adopted their dog" (150). In their study of visitor behaviour in animal shelters, Alexandra Protopopova and Clive D.L. Wynne found that "the morphology of the dogs, but not behaviour, affected interest from shelter visitors" (485). These findings about the impact of the appearance of dogs in the real world have powerful implications for dogs in fictional worlds: writers' decisions about dog characters' appearance are critical to readers' responses, and therefore are critical to the process of dog character construction.

This section argues that the initial description of a dog character signals the role of the character in the text. Further, the features included in the description enact a coded language of meaning for interpreting personality traits, and a major component of the coded language is the attractiveness or unattractiveness of the dog. Attractiveness increases the possibility of reader attachment, and unattractiveness frees the dog from expectations to perform "dog" in appealing or expected ways, and therefore activates the possibility of complexity.

In making this argument, I draw on scholarship on the appearance of female (human) characters. Their status as the subordinate, supplementary 'other' in a binary pair—women to men, dogs to humans—creates cultural parallels regarding expectations and interpretations of appearance. As Vint claims, "there are many parallels between the ways in which women have been constructed, controlled, spoken for and objectified by patriarchal culture, and

similar constraints placed on animals by Western culture more generally" (111).[8] These corresponding expectations and interpretations allow the application of scholarship on female character appearance to arguments on dog character appearance.

Dogs Lacking a Description of Appearance

Dog characters introduced without a physical description are generally marginal characters. When no direct reference to their appearance is given, the text often refers to them using a combination of two or three other elements. In Fiona Lowe's *Picture Perfect Wedding,* Mac is introduced by breed, name, and gender: "Luke Anderson sat on the small, sandy beach with his border collie, Mac" (loc 161). No other information is given about Mac in his introduction except that he is "a friendly dog" (loc 210). According to the American Kennel Club (AKC), there are seventeen standard colours and a further five non-standard colours for border collies, which creates a large pool of options for Mac's coat. With no descriptive detail to challenge the most common image in popular media—the black and white border collie—it is likely that most readers' image of Mac will default to that colouring. Dog characters like Mac lack distinctiveness, a key indication that either this character will be marginal, and/or will perform dog in expected ways.

Defining Canine Attractiveness

A dog's visual appeal to humans may at first seem bound to abstract and ethereal notions of beauty, but it can be broken down into human responses to features such as eyes, ears, coats, and facial proportions. In a study using manipulated photos of dog faces that asked participants to choose which image they preferred, Julie Hecht and Alexandra Horowitz

[8] For further discussion on the intersection of animal studies and feminism / gender studies, see Adams and Gruen, especially 1-3, and Rossini, especially 117-118.

found that dogs with larger eyes as well as those with coloured irises are more appealing to humans (160). According to Jamie L. Fratkin and Suzanne C. Baker, "[f]or humans, ear shape is clearly a salient feature of dog anatomy" (131). Using photos of a dog that had been manipulated to have pointy ears in one photo and floppy ears in another, they asked people to rate the dog on several factors. Overall, they found that participants attributed more "positive traits to floppy-eared dogs" and predicted that floppy-eared dogs would be more likely to be adopted from shelters (131). Arguably the most significant aspect of a dog's appearance for fiction writers is the colour of their coat. Various researchers have investigated the most—and least—appealing colours, with findings showing that black dogs rarely make the list of preferred dogs[9]. Lighter colours (white, yellow, grey, chocolate) and patterns (merle, multi-colour) consistently appeal to humans (Wells and Hepper, Lepper, DeLeeuw, Fratkin and Baker). Another facet of dog appearance that raises a strong response from humans is coat length, with longer coats being preferred over medium-length coats, and shorter coats the least preferred. Alexandra C. Horowitz and Marc Bekoff also discuss fur and "fuzziness" as factors that "increase the seeming 'cuddliness' of an animal" and encourage a "cute response" from humans. A dog's facial proportions appeal to humans on two levels: through similarity to human infants and through symmetry. When asked to choose between a range of canine faces, humans show a pattern of preferring those with paedomorphic proportions, such as large foreheads (see fig. 3), "large and low-lying eyes" (Archer and Monton 217), and "bigger eyes and a larger space between the eyes" indicating "a larger cranial vault" (Hecht

[9] The origin of this preference has not been investigated as much as its expression and consequences. A notable, and recent, exception is a study by Jennifer Coleman et al. who found evidence to connect racism to the bias against black dogs through the use of Implicit Association Tests (IATs) with a range of stimuli, including illustrations of dogs and rabbits. They found "evidence of pro-White bias across all five IATs" and, further, that, "pro-White bias was significant among White and other racial/ethnic participants but not among Black participants" (423). This evidence of the link between racism and bias against black dogs will, I expect, attract further research in the future.

and Horowitz 159). Jeanne Fahnestock points to classic definitions of female beauty, such as those dictated by nineteenth-century German art historian and aesthetician Johann Winckelmann, when she identifies the "perfect face—three noses long and two noses wide … The general idea is that perfect beauty is invariable symmetry, a harmony of just proportion" (330). The phrasing of these ideals is strikingly similar to modern conventions of dog perfection. The American Kennel Club specifies that for a cocker spaniel to "be in correct balance, the distance from the stop to the tip of the nose is one half the distance from the stop up over the crown to the base of the skull" (AKC Breed Standards, Cocker Spaniel). This research indicates that dogs are most attractive to humans when they have large eyes, floppy ears, a medium or long coat length, a lighter coloured coat, large foreheads, and facial proportions that are symmetrical and paedomorphic.

Fig. 3. High/large forehead (front) vs low forehead (back). (Author's own dogs.)

Muffin the cocker spaniel from Rachael Johns's *A Dog and a Diamond* is typical of the dogs from my corpus that humans find attractive (see fig. 4). He is a "gorgeous golden cocker spaniel that look[s] up at [the hero] with wide, wary eyes" (64), meeting the criterion of large eyes. His ears, which are "long, floppy, furry things" (64), are more appealing than pointy ears, his gold coat is one of the preferred colours, and he "has a lot of fur" (21), giving him the look of fuzziness. Muffin's appearance, then, is demonstrably attractive.

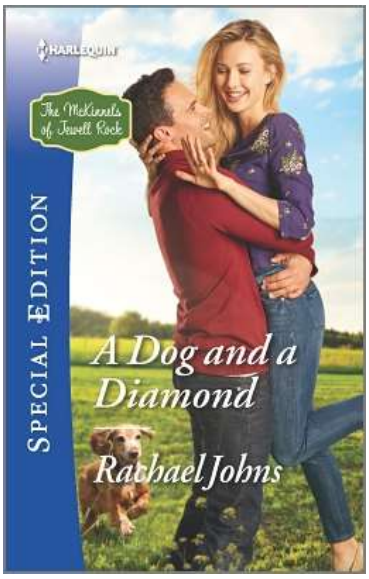

Fig. 4. Cover image of Muffin from *A Dog and a Diamond* by Rachael Johns.

Defining Canine Unattractiveness

Several dog characters in the corpus are explicitly labelled unattractive. As discussed above, in Warren's *Kiss a Girl in the Rain,* the hero Evan thinks the stray dog he accidentally hit with his motorbike is "[t]oo ugly to be a pet" (41) and considers him "the World's Homeliest Dog" (42) before naming him "Homely." Homely is "[b]edraggled, with a tangle of matted brown hair … a dog only fleas could love" (34). As Charlotte Wright explains, it is not necessary to use the word "ugly" or be explicit in other ways to convey that a character is unattractive. She argues that, for female human characters, "[t]he use of buzzwords and descriptions of 'unacceptable' physical traits are two key methods that authors use to delineate a character's ugliness" (20). The "buzzwords" and "unacceptable physical traits" that Wright identifies are also applicable to the examination of dog characters' unattractiveness.

Overweight dogs are rare in the corpus, and when they do appear, their body fat is employed as a negative trait. Wright explains that "many … ugly and repulsive female characters are fat" and "the word 'fat' [is] often used as a buzzword to communicate ugliness

to the contemporary reader" (17). Her claim applies equally to the dog characters of the corpus. In Lori Foster's "Tailspin," the hero Buck is pet-sitting a Chihuahua while his neighbour is fostering another Chihuahua, Tish. When Buck first sees Tish, he thinks she's "way fatter" than the Chihuahua he's looking after, and notes that she is "missing some fur." Tish has "a bald forehead with other bare patches on [her] belly and behind" and is "about the ugliest little dog Buck had ever seen" (16). When the heroine Sadie confronts him for labelling the dog ugly, Buck thinks, "[h]e hadn't lied. She was bald and fat. Anyone could see that" (24).

As discussed in the Age section below, few novels in the corpus depict a senior dog, and even fewer allow the dog to be senior *and* attractive. Wright argues that for female human characters, a "word guaranteed to conjure up the image of ugliness is 'old'" (18). Twelve-year-old C.J. in *Dear Cordelia* has inherited a trust fund when her owner died (overseen by her owner's nephew Jack), to cover the cost of a caretaker in her own home. When the caretaker dies, Jack wonders who would "want to take care of a fat, old, shedding, slobbering basset hound that had one bulging eye from glaucoma" (19).

Non-human animal species vary widely in their popularity, and one method of marking any animal as unattractive is to link them with an animal lower in that hierarchy. This is also true of humans: Wright discusses the use of animal imagery "to distinguish [ugly] women from their more 'normal' (i.e., beautiful) counterparts" (19). The corpus reveals a similar process of trait transference in descriptions of dogs through comparisons to less appealing non-human animals, particularly those considered vermin. Katie in *Crazy for You* is "fairly ratty" (12), and Coco in Lisa Kleypas's *Brown-Eyed Girl* looks like "a mole rat with bulging eyes" (175).

A further technique used in the corpus novels to convey unattractiveness is to describe an irregular feature, that is, the opposite of one which is appealing to the human gaze. As

Fahnestock claims, when discussing human female attractiveness, "[i]rregular features must deviate from some standard of feminine beauty" (330). Spot in Crusie's *Faking It* has "beady eyes" that almost meet "over his long knife-edged nose" (3), in direct contrast to the human preference for large eyes and a large space between the eyes. Tish in "Tailspin" has significant bald patches rather than "cuddly" fur. Cricket in Melanie Milburne's *The Most Scandalous Ravensdale* has "a lower jaw that stuck out a few millimetres like a drawer that hadn't been shut properly" (38)—an irregular feature that contravenes the harmonious facial proportions humans find appealing. Additionally, Cricket does not have a "cuddly" coat—the human preference—or even a smooth coat. Instead, "[h]is wiry coat was a caramel brown with little flecks of white that stood up at odd angles like they had been stuck on as an afterthought" (38).

An irregular appearance that deviates from the ideal also encompasses dogs with a disability, or who are sick or wounded. Again, there is a parallel here in female human characters: Wright argues that "[a]nother incarnation of female ugliness is the ill, scarred, or deformed character" (18). Samantha the Pekingese in Kristine Rolofson's "Secondhand Sam" has only one eye. She is also "the oldest dog" of the three dogs the heroine has rescued from a kill shelter and is "in bad health" (130). In addition to being old, Samantha is both ill and deformed, clearly positioning her as an ugly dog. Both Samantha and C.J. have deformities of their eyes, which, given the significance of eyes in the attractiveness of dogs, marks them as especially unattractive.

Significantly, covers featuring unattractive dogs are rare in the corpus, and in those that exist, the dogs are not displayed in the same way as attractive dogs, such as Muffin (see

fig. 3). C.J. is blurred in the background, Katie is in the distance, and only Homely is clearly visible[10] (see fig. 5).

The descriptions of dog characters such as Homely, C.J., Samantha, Tish, Katie, Coco, Spot and Cricket reveal their unattractiveness. A few, such as Homely and Tish, are explicitly labelled as "ugly," but others, like human female characters, are coded as unattractive through "buzzwords" and "unacceptable physical traits." Many unattractive dogs, such as C.J. and Samantha, have multiple elements of unattractiveness, leaving no doubt that these characters are to be read as unattractive.

Fig. 5. Covers featuring dogs that fit the criteria of 'unattractive': (l to r) Cordelia / C.J. in Pamela Ford's *Dear Cordelia*; Homely in Nancy Warren's *Kiss a Girl in the Rain*; Katie in Jennifer Crusie's *Crazy for You*.

Eye of the Beholder

Not everyone—in the real world or in fiction—will agree on whether a certain dog is attractive or not. When stray dog Katie first appears in *Crazy for You*, she is described as "the

[10] The reason for Homely's outlier status is likely that *Kiss a Girl in the Rain* is a self-published novel. The author contracted her own cover from a graphic designer, and it did not need to pass through a publishing house's marketing department.

canine equivalent of an exposed nerve: wiry black body, skinny white legs, narrow black head, all of it held together with so much tension that the poor baby shuddered with it" (1). The heroine Quinn notices, and focuses on, attractive features, such as Katie's "big dark liquid eyes" (5); however, Quinn's best friend considers Katie a "runty little dog" (18). The contrasting responses create a more complete picture of Katie's appearance.

Emotional attachment to a dog can also lead to conflicting perceptions of attractiveness, creating a 'love is blind' effect. Pinar Thorn et al. found that owners were more attached to dogs they perceived to be cute dogs. They assessed the relationships between dogs and their owners across seven factors and found that "[o]wner-perceived canine cuteness was a significant unique predictor of every relationship measure and a stronger predictor than any canine personality measure on three of seven relationship measures" (583). The inverse also appears to be true—they suspect that it is "possible that owners' cuteness ratings may be reflective of their relationship with their dog, rather than physical cuteness being a determinant of relationship quality" (578). For Thorn et al., this finding raised the question: "[i]s relationship quality affected by genuine physical cuteness, or are cuteness ratings affected by relationship quality?" (578). Their study suggested that both are true, that "a bi-directional relationship" exists "between perceived cuteness and other attributes: cute dogs are perceived to have more desirable personality traits, but having a strong relationship with a dog may also inflate its perceived cuteness" (569).

Several texts in the corpus explore this effect. At the beginning of "Tailspin," the heroine Sadie is fostering Tish, who is in poor physical condition and has been abused. When the hero Buck first sees her, he thinks she is "about the ugliest little dog [he] had ever seen" (16). When describing Tish to friends, Buck says: "'Tish is fat and bald and this morning, she stole my underwear'" (79). When Buck falls in love with Sadie, however, he "even loved her difficult little dog" (106). When other men laugh at him for walking two Chihuahuas, Buck

retorts that the men "wish they had dogs as fine as these two" (109). Near the end of the novella, Buck tells Sadie:

> "You are planning to keep Tish, aren't you? Because I gotta tell you, if you don't, I will."
>
> Sadie's head jerked up. "Really?"
>
> "Damn right. She needs someone to love her a lot. Forever. She needs calm and quiet. In just the two weeks I've known her, she's gotten back more fur."
>
> Sadie looked caught between laughing and crying. "She looks like a sleek little seal now, doesn't she?"
>
> "She's beautiful." (116)

Buck's progression from seeing Tish as ugly and homely to beautiful follows the progression of his attachment to her. Attractive dogs are denied the opportunity for the multi-layered response to their appearance that Katie receives, or the progression in perceptions that Tish receives. A degree of subjectivity in the perceptions of a dog character's appearance—either through two or more conflicting opinions of the dog's attractiveness, or a progression of perceptions from ugly to attractive—is a further signal of the character's complexity and potential role within the text.

Advantages of an Attractive Dog Character

While unattractive dogs suggest a potential for richness of character, attractive dogs have the advantage of narrative efficiency. In an experiment conducted by Protopopova et al., participants were asked to rate the attractiveness of dogs from a shelter, unaware that the dogs had already been either adopted or euthanized. The dogs who had gone on to be adopted were deemed by the participants to be more attractive than those who had been euthanized, and the difference between the two groups was significant (61). This human preference for attractive

dogs has implications for the reception of fictional dogs both by human characters and by readers. Humans like attractive dogs. It follows that a quick way to engender positive regard for a dog character is to make them attractive.

Dog characters that fit the scientific criteria of attractiveness, such as Muffin, are consistently liked by other characters upon first meeting. When Muffin accompanies the heroine to meet the hero's family, the hero's mother greets Muffin with the question: "And who is this delightful thing?" (77) and his ten-year-old nephew is "besotted with the dog" (88). These responses are in contrast to less positive reactions that unattractive dog characters receive when meeting new characters. In *Dear Cordelia*, when a potential new caretaker meets C.J. her response is negative: "The girl jumped back. '*Eeowww*. What's wrong with his eye?'" (39). C.J.'s guardian is aware that her appearance is a barrier to other characters liking her. During the interviews for a new caretaker, he has a moment alone with the dog and says:

> "Don't worry. I'll find someone to take care of you . . . Someone who likes you just the way you are."
>
> He frowned down at the dandruff and brushed it away. No need to have too many obvious flaws for the next interviewee to see. (29)

Unlike Muffin, C.J. is rarely liked at first sight by human characters, and the characters who like her do so despite her ugliness. Muffin, with his large (non-protruding) eyes and furry coat, faces no such impediment, encouraging a rapid bond between reader and dog character.

Beyond first impressions, the quality of long-term relationships between dogs and humans is also influenced by canine attractiveness. Thorn et al.'s findings, mentioned above, were so strong that they claimed a novel finding, the "Canine Cuteness Effect," which they defined as "a tendency for modern dog owners to report stronger relationships with dogs they perceive to be cute" (581). When applied to fictional dogs, this research indicates that an

efficient way to build reader attachment and emotional investment in a dog character is to make them attractive according to norms of canine beauty or cuteness.

Advantages of an Unattractive Dog Character

A useful feature of unattractiveness in a dog character is the inbuilt potential for uniqueness. As Linda Kraus Worley argues when discussing human female characters' appearance, "[t]he timeless presence of beauty is counterpointed by the diverse and changing individuality of ugliness" (369). Ugly dog characters have a similar potential for "diverse and changing individuality." The visual image of a golden cocker spaniel, like Muffin, is roughly interchangeable with another golden cocker spaniel. In contrast, Cricket, from *The Most Scandalous Ravensdale*, with his protruding jaw and spiky coat, is unique. The distinctiveness of an unattractive dog is explored in *Brown-Eyed Girl* when the heroine's cousin meets newly adopted Coco:

> "You have such high standards. You love beautiful, tasteful things. And this dog is so ugly and scraggly, and…*Dios mio*, she's a lemon." Sitting beside me, she reached out to let Coco smell her hand. Coco sniffed daintily and let Sofia pet her.
>
> "She's not a lemon," I said, "she's *jolie laide*."
>
> "What does that mean?"
>
> "It's a term for a woman who's not conventionally beautiful, but she's beautiful in a unique way. Like Cate Blanchett or Meryl Streep." (176)

Coco's appearance seeds her potential to become more than a flat character, a potential she likely would not have possessed had she been "conventionally beautiful." With reference to human female beauty, Worley claims:

> Although diverse, the narrative scripts of the nineteenth century too often result in the ultimate re-iterability of the beautiful heroine, who can be re-incarnated at will as

> Aphrodite, Isis, Hebe, Iphigenia, or the Madonna. The beautiful heroine's individuality disappears under the power of the eternal feminine. (377)

Worley's argument that the price of female beauty is the loss of the character's individuality is relevant here—a dog's individuality disappears under the power of prescribed standards of canine perfection. The physical form of each of the seven Great Danes in the corpus novels are within the parameters set down by the American Kennel Club for the breed. Milburne's Cricket has no such standards—or restrictions—for his appearance. As Worley claims, "[a]n 'ideal ugly' does not replace 'ideal beauty'" (377)—a circumstance which makes space for greater diversity and bestows dog characters who are not attractive with distinctiveness.

Beyond granting individuality, the trait of unattractiveness also activates the possibility of narrative complexity. Worley writes:

> Indeed, it is precisely the fact that the [ugly] heroines are not constrained by the culturally determined boundaries set for beauty—for Woman—that allows them the social and symbolic freedom to develop as individuals. They do not disappear into metaphor or cliché. They do, however, provide alternate texts from which to read and to question the monolithic constructs of Woman. (377)

Similarly, the risk of an attractive dog character disappearing into "metaphor or cliché" is high, as is the risk of their actions being constrained by our ideas of what a dog should be and do. For example, Muffin performs dog in ways that are consistently pleasing to humans (such as being affectionate and/or entertaining). His few actions that are not as pleasing, such as escaping after an intruder leaves the front door open, are still within the acceptable boundaries of dog behaviour. In contrast, when Kat, the heroine of *The Most Scandalous Ravensdale,* takes Cricket to a dog park, he performs in a less pleasing way: "straining at the leash and bark[ing] and snarl[ing] as if [he were] ready to rip [the other dogs] apart" (73). Kat finds the experience "humiliating" (73). Another ugly dog, Katie from *Crazy for You,* "[i]s a

submission pee-er" (29) who urinates on the floor when people pat her. The application of Worley's argument to dog characters reveals that through their ugliness, Cricket and Katie move beyond the "culturally determined boundaries" of acceptable dog behaviour and provide alternative acts which, to paraphrase Worley, question the "monolithic constructs of [Dog]." Their ugliness signals this potential to flout expectations of behaviour. Fahnestock writes: "When novelists begin to create irregularly featured heroines who deviate from the standard of beauty, what happens to the female characters behind the faces? The characters are allowed imperfection too" (330). Cricket and Katie both deviate from the standard of beauty, and have also been allowed imperfections in behaviour. Further, Wright argues that inventing "ugly" characters "is key to freeing the heroine from the emotional and physical burdens of family, lovers, and society, *because of,* and not *in spite of*, the fact that it makes her less desirable to all three" (11). As they are already less desirable to humans, the state of ugliness frees the dog character from expectations to act in ways that are pleasing to humans.

Codes in Dogs' Appearance

Dog characters' appearance carries encoded meanings linked to specific personality traits. Humans have been reading human faces for millennia, searching for hidden information in variations of features. In tracing the history of this phenomenon, Fahnestock claims "[p]hysiognomy is an ancient science. The first treatise on it, *De Physiognoma*, is attributed to Aristotle, and this work begins by examining earlier, unrecorded systems" (334). It is perhaps unsurprising then that we would use the same principles when reading the faces of our closest non-human allies—dogs.

Beauty and ugliness, in a broad sense, have historically been correlated with good and bad respectively. Henrik Specht asserts that there is a "fundamental 'principle of beauty and ugliness' in medieval literature, that is, a straight and near-mechanical equation between

physical appearance and moral character" (134). Specht argues that in medieval literature, beauty equals goodness, and "ugliness … serves to notify the reader that he is in the presence of a character or a being whose revolting physical appearance is the direct result of grave moral turpitude or some other evil influence" (135). While none of the dog characters in the corpus novels are evil, Katie in *Crazy for You* is directly linked to evilness by a secondary character. When Quinn rescues the dog, her best friend labels Katie as ugly and when Quinn announces she is keeping Katie over the objections of her boyfriend, Darla replies:

> "What if he says, 'It's the dog or me?' Tell me you're not going to risk your relationship over a dog."
>
> The dog looked over as she spoke, almost as if it were narrowing its eyes at her, and Darla noticed for the first time how sneaky it looked. Tempting. Almost devilish. Well, that made sense. If Quinn had been in Eden, Satan would have showed up as a cocker spaniel. (19)

The connection Darla makes between an "ugly" dog and the labels "sneaky" and "devilish" is striking when considered beside Specht's point on the medieval association between ugliness and evil influence. The bestowal of beauty on a dog character implies to the reader that the dog's default position is one of goodness, while constructing an unattractive dog character raises the subtle question of their capacity to be bad.

Beyond general meanings of attractiveness versus unattractiveness, folk theories about the correlation between specific features and personality traits have survived many centuries and driven characterization in literary works from *The Canterbury Tales* (see, for example, Specht) to *Jane Eyre* (see, for example, Kronshage). In analysing the role of physiognomics in nineteenth century literature, Eike Kronshage argues that:

> physiognomics aims at an interpretation of character by minute observation of outer features, particularly facial ones. In this aspect, physiognomic observation and literary

> portraiture overlap … In realist fiction, character is primarily revealed through detailed physiognomic portraiture, and, consequently, many nineteenth-century realist novels are replete with physiognomic portraits. (2)

When writing dog characters, without the use of dialogue and human non-verbal communication, authors have fewer options to reveal character than when writing human characters; the use of physiognomic portraits is one technique which remains. Indeed, there are many similarities between the way past writers have actively used physiognomics as detailed by Kronshage and the way dog appearance is discussed today. Hecht and Horowitz have noted that "organisations such as the American Kennel Club employ specific language to describe the requirements of each breed's physical appearance and often link physical appearance to temperament characteristics" (154). The American Kennel Club's breed standards describe the Great Dane as having "in its regal appearance, dignity, strength and elegance," and Labrador retrievers having "[k]ind, friendly eyes imparting good temperament, intelligence and alertness … Black, or yellow eyes give a harsh expression and are undesirable." Compare this to Fahnestock's observation:

> When novelists in mid-[nineteenth]century described the shape of any of a heroine's features they gave their readers a clue to her character. … A large, mobile mouth was a sign of sensuality, delicate nostrils of sensitivity, a high forehead of intelligence, bright eyes of quick perceptions, and so on. (Fahnestock 339)

Understanding these codes of physiognomy provided the authors and readers of the time with a second language with which to communicate character. In current times, humans utilize a similar system to interpret canine appearance, both in reality and in fiction. Accordingly, a list of canine features and the way they are interpreted by humans could be compiled.

As previously discussed, black coats are among the least attractive to humans, and have been shown to decrease both the likelihood and speed of adoption. Fratkin and Baker

further show that, when comparing photos of the same dog with its coat manipulated to look either yellow or black, participants' perceptions changed on three of five personality traits. The yellow dog was attributed higher agreeableness, emotional stability, and conscientiousness than the black dog (130). These perceptions are contrary to research which has linked higher incidences of aggression in yellow/golden coats as compared to black coats in cocker spaniels and Labradors (Mehrkam & Wynne 16). Of one hundred and fifty-five dog characters in the corpus only eight are black[11]. Three of those are puppies (including a nine-month-old)—their age a possible mitigating factor against the negative traits—and three are working dogs (two in bomb detection, and one in search and rescue), where the traits perceived to be associated with black coats (such as being less calm than dogs with lighter coats) work in the dog character's favour. The seventh black dog is Atlas the Great Dane from Kate Angell's *No One Like You*, whose black-coatedness is somewhat erased by his being depicted as a blue Great Dane on the novel's cover (see fig. 6). Besides Atlas, there is one adult, pet dog in the corpus who has a black coat: Cobie the Labrador cross from Sasha Summers's *Dog Park Sweethearts* (though the cover depicts another dog from the story, a white and brown terrier). The novels abound, however, in warm, emotionally stable, dependable yellow and gold dogs. Assuming the corpus works authors' intentions were to avoid creating dog characters with the traits Frakin and Baker show are linked to black dogs, ie., "critical, quarrelsome," "anxious and easily upset" and less disciplined and obedient (130), then the rarity of black dog characters makes sense.

[11] Another dog character, Colin the dachshund from Casey Griffin's *Must Love Weiners*, is described several times in the text as a black dachshund (a non-standard, rare colour according to the AKC website). However there is mention in the text of "light brown around his snout" (21) and he is pictured as black and tan on the cover, implying that 'black' is likely shorthand for black and tan.

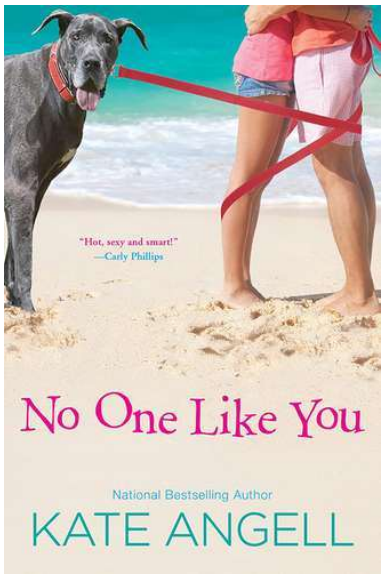

Fig. 6. Kate Angell's *No One Like You* featuring Atlas the black Great Dane, who is depicted in the cover art as a blue Great Dane.

Fahnestock argues that nineteenth-century authors, instead of allowing the narrator to present the reader with a summary of a character's personality, were able to:

> achieve something of the same effect more dramatically and concisely if they gave instead details of physical description which stood for character traits. Of course this substitution only worked if writers and readers shared a system of meaning, a code for translating descriptive terminology into aspects of personality. (325)

The code the writers and readers of the nineteenth century shared was physiognomy. A similar shared system is operating in our current time with codes for translating the appearance of dogs, and that assumption is translated into romance fiction. The age-old drive to read meaning into facets of appearance has made its way to human understanding of dogs, both in the real world and in fiction, and any effort to undertake practice-based research on writing dogs must take this into account.

Conclusion

Dogs in fiction are constructed for, and seen through, the human gaze—albeit the gaze of the mind's eye—and that gaze is pleased by attractive dogs. As humans care more about attractive dogs, the bestowal of attractiveness on a dog character is a shortcut to creating reader attachment and emotional investment in the dog character. In contrast, ugliness frees the character from the restraints of performing dog in expected and/or appealing ways, signalling the possibility of a complex character. When presented with a written portrait of a dog, readers search for coded meaning, that is, to reveal specific personality traits through reading individual features: a dog character with a high forehead and a yellow coat contains different embedded codes to those of a dog character with a low forehead and a black coat. Regardless of the exact details of the dog's appearance, the mere inclusion of a physical description of the dog character—the devotion of space in the text and requirement to remember the image—cues the reader to pay attention. A dog character with their appearance described is a dog character endowed with potential.

3: BREED

"She's a mutt so it's not like someone lost an expensive pedigree dog": Purity, Individuality, and Potential within Breed.

Introduction

"Picture a dog," Alexandra Horowitz writes. "It's likely a breed, or recognizably breed-like" (*Ourselves* 87). 'Dog' and 'breed' are so entangled that it is difficult to imagine discussing a dog without mention of their breed. On the larger scale, an entire industry exists in which dogs are bred to 'standards,' registered with official clubs, and entered into competitions to compete for the title of 'best in breed.' Yet the construct of breed is a surprisingly slippery one. Most dog breeds are relatively new: Heidi G. Parker writes that it was during "the Victorian era that the breeds as we recognize them today came into being" and that the "majority of dog breeds are isolated by rules and by whim" (20). Additionally, even those familiar with dogs find it difficult to accurately distinguish breeds: Voith et al. compared DNA evidence against the breed identified by dog adoption agencies and found that in 87.5% of cases, the two did not match (253). For example, an adult dog identified as a cocker spaniel by the adoption agency, was found to be 25% Rottweiler, 25% American Eskimo dog, 25% golden retriever, and 25% Nova Scotia duck-tolling retriever (256). Regardless of the imprecise nature of 'breed,' we depend heavily on its two dimensions—whether the dog is a purebred or 'mutt,' and which specific breed/s are in their lineage—to anticipate and understand a dog. According to Horowitz:

> Knowing the breed of a dog gives us a first-pass entry into understanding something about the dog before we have even met the dog. But it is a mistake to think that knowing a breed guarantees that it will behave as advertised—only that it has certain tendencies. (*Inside* 55)

In both the real world and story world breed is heavily relied upon to give us this "first-pass entry" to canine personality, but the danger in assuming that breed guarantees a character template is the possibility of erasing individuality and stripping the dog of its potential for a layered personality. This section argues that in popular romance fiction breed does more work than any other element to establish character through both the purebred/mutt dichotomy and the choice of specific breed, and that this carries risks as well as opportunities for the dog character.

Purebreds

'Purebred' is a word that evokes ideas of quality, purity, and high-class status, and studies show that it is an especially desirable trait when choosing a dog (DeLeeuw 21; Lepper et al. 40; Siettou et al. 42). McHugh argues that "[s]porting or show-champion breed dogs may become attractive to own because they make their owners feel richer, stronger or otherwise favourably socially entrenched in changing times" (*Dog* loc 1642). To make a dog character a purebred is to bestow on them a veneer of superiority. When artist Tilda completes a mural for a private client in *Faking It*, the client tells her that the dog whose image has been incorporated into the mural will be surrendered that day to the pound.

> "You're taking your dog to the pound?" At Tilda's feet, Spot pressed against her, shedding on her jeans.
>
> "He's not my dog," Clarissa said. "You always put dogs in your murals—"
>
> "No I don't," Tilda said.
>
> "—it said so in the magazine, so I had to have one, too, or people wouldn't think it was a real Matilda Veronica, so I went and got the only purebred they had."
>
> "Spot's a purebred?"
>
> "Silver dapple, longhaired dachshund," Clarissa said. (3)

Despite indications that he is disposable to Clarissa, Spot's character has been granted the cachet of purebred status, something reinforced by Clarissa's concern that people know that the mural painted on her dining room wall is authentic, a "real Matilda Veronica."

Naturally, the concept of the purebred, with its boundaries being policed, necessitates an opposite: dogs whose lineage is not as 'pure;' dogs that the purebred dog's bloodlines must be protected from. As McHugh notes, "[a]t one extreme, terms like mongrel and mutt make breed a kind of measuring stick, according to which most dogs fall short" (*Dog* loc 1558). Lucky from Virginia Kantra's *Carolina Dreaming* is described as:

> A big dog. Gabe eyed it warily as its body followed its nose out of the shadows: broad head, heavy shoulders, dirty tail close to the ground. … It looked like a trailer park dog, a lean, mean, scruffy bastard. Some kind of pit bull-shepherd mix, maybe, smart and aggressive. … Its black-and-tan coat was gray with grime. Its shoulders stuck up, its belly caved in. (28)

The association between low social class and the dog's lack of breeding is made explicit with the reference to Lucky looking like a "trailer park dog."

The majority (75%) of dogs in the corpus are purebred, or only identified by one breed (see fig. 7). McHugh notes that "[l]ike all social elites, the breed member may be highly visible but it has always been a part of a tiny minority in the overall canine population" (*Dog* loc 1536). In short, most dogs are crossbreeds, yet that is not reflected in the dog characters across the corpus, perhaps because the deployment of purebred status brings a technical advantage: narrative efficiency. The first time Mackenzie meets her new neighbour Oliver in Sarah Mayberry's *The Other Side of Us*, she thinks: "For the first time she registered that he had a dog, too—a miniature schnauzer by the look of her" (23). Oliver's dog Strudel is not left to be merely defined as a miniature schnauzer—her character is fleshed out in the story—but this early description is able to be brief as it accesses a shared

cultural understanding through the typology of breeds. Writing a purebred character grants the author an efficiency through reliance on the reader's likely awareness of a breed's temperament and appearance when introducing a dog character. A crossbred mutt brings neither an impression of quality nor narrative efficiency to its story, things which are the birthright of the purebred character.

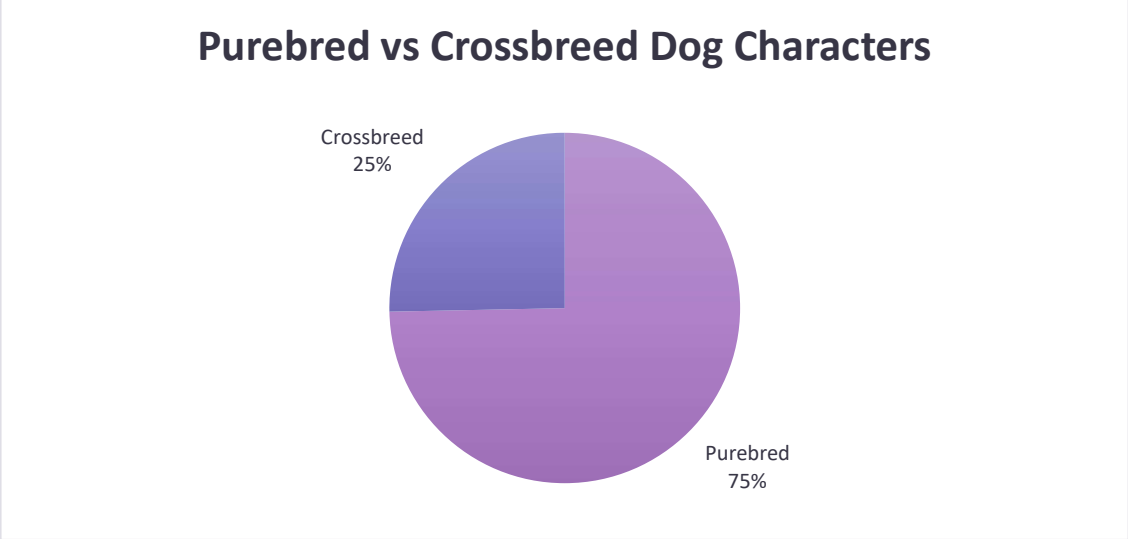

Fig. 7. Percentage of purebred / single breed dog characters in corpus to crossbreeds. Designer crosses, such as labradoodle and cavoodle, have been coded as purebred. Dogs identified by a general grouping, such as terrier or spaniel, have not been included in this breakdown unless specifically identified as a cross, such as 'terrier cross,' as pure/cross status is impossible to ascertain. N=146.

Fashion, Popularity, Representation

Discussing human character types, Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver argue that "types also change, they come and go, they interrupt, they mutate" (4). Dog breeds, which, as argued below, can be equated with character types, also shift over time and place. Breeds once thought of as gentle are now considered aggressive, and breeds adored in one country are less so in others. In an analysis of trends from 1946-2003, Harold Herzog found that "shifts in preferences for some types of dogs" have the "hallmarks of fads" and "social contagion", and

that "[i]n this regard, pets are no different from popular music, athletic shoes, and clothing styles. In short, dog breeds have become a form of fashion" (390). This popularity can be affected by things such as "class imitation" where "exclusive" breeds "such as Corgies and Lhasa Apsos, originally the province of royalty, as well as hunting breeds such as English and Irish Setters, historically associated with the landed gentry" gain popularity outside the upper class and "filter into the mainstream" (391). Variation in dog breed popularity is made visible through lists of most popular dogs in each country from year to year.[12] Popularity is also affected by popular culture, such as movies: Ghirlanda et al. found increases in breed popularity for up to ten years following a movie featuring that breed in a main role (3). The pressure from popular culture can also work in the reverse direction. McHugh relays the story that E.B. White, "[w]riting in the USA on the eve of the Second World War … observed that 'in the last war if a man owned a dachshund he was suspected of being pro-German' but that in this one 'they just think [he is] eccentric'" (*Dog* loc 1487). A dog character's breed taps into the broad positive—or negative—regard society has for that breed.

At one end of the scale stands the perennially popular dogs. In 2019, the American Kennel Club website announced "the Labrador Retriever, German Shepherd Dog, and Golden Retriever are America's top three breeds for yet another year. They've all held those positions steady since the turn of the century." Each of the three breeds are represented well in the corpus: Labrador retrievers have the highest representation (18 dogs), golden retrievers second (14 dogs) and German shepherds are tied for third (8 dogs) (see fig. 8). Daisy is introduced on the first page of Jaci Burton's *Hope Flames* with the line, "Daisy, her yellow Labrador retriever, thumped her tail and looked up at her, dark eyes filled with adoration" (1). Daisy stands on the shoulders of her breed's unrivalled popularity—the most popular breed in the

[12] For example, the AKC provides yearly lists of the most popular breeds according to registrations, that can be accessed here: www.akc.org/most-popular-breeds/

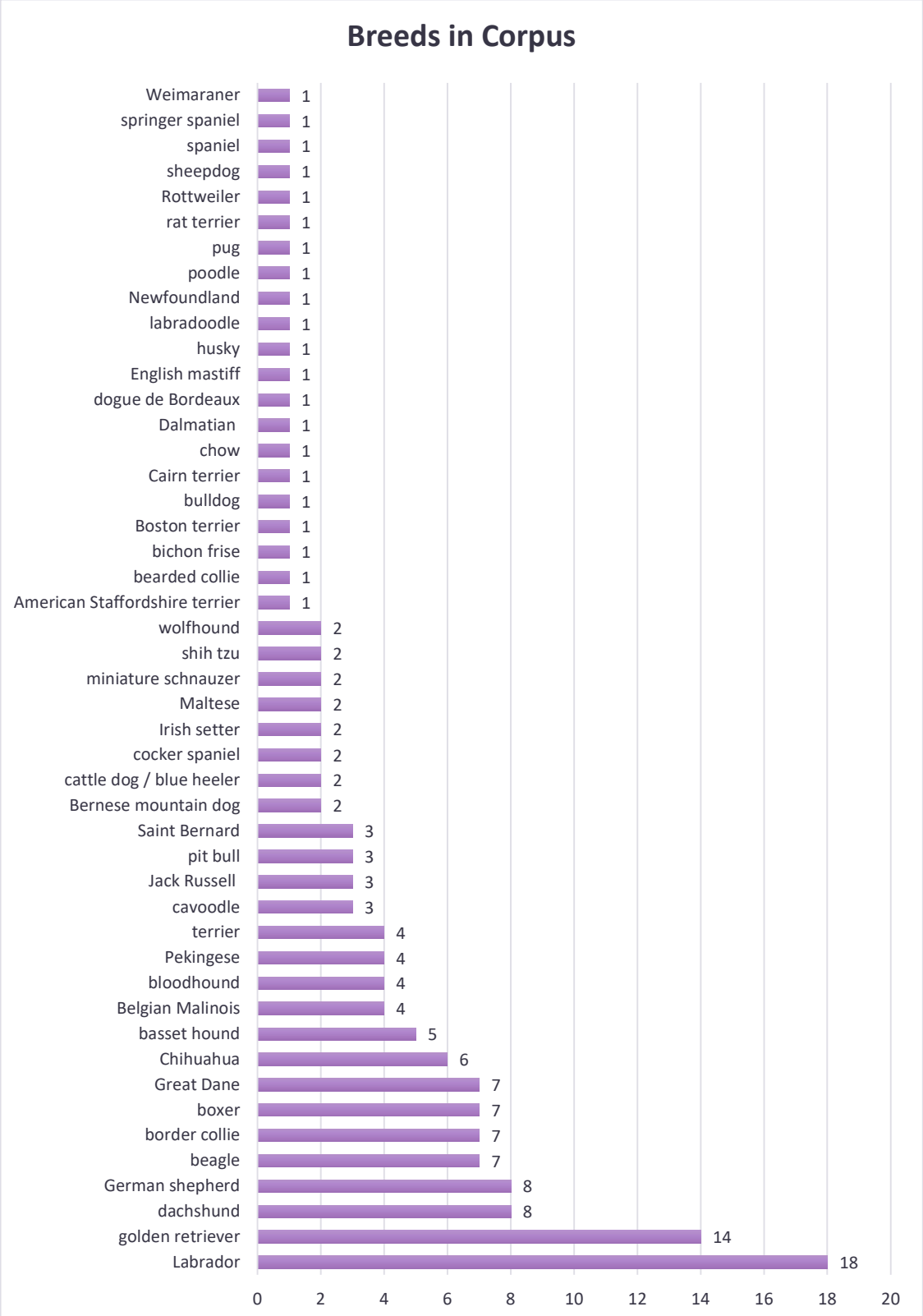

Fig. 8. Breakdown of dog characters in corpus by breed. This pattern generally reflects dog breed representation in the community. (N = 152. Where a dog character has two breeds, eg., basset x beagle, it has been coded twice, once for each breed. Dogs identified only as a cross or mixed breed have not been included.)

US since 1991[13] and a long-time favourite breed in the UK.[14] One dog that has a lower popularity ranking yet has a strong showing in the corpus is the Great Dane (7 dogs). However Great Danes have had a strong presence in the movies, TV, and newspaper comics since at least the 40s, including comic / cartoon Great Danes who were all adapted for movies: Marmaduke, Scooby Doo, and Astro (from *The Jetsons*). Despite Great Danes not being as common as many other breeds in the community, their consistent presence in popular culture gives writers and readers familiarity with the breed, facilitating their strong representation in the romance genre.

At the other end of the scale, pit bulls arguably have the least of society's positive regard. Horowitz writes:

> Today, one breed, more than others, bears the brunt of the characterization of certain breeds as irredeemably evil: the so-called pit bull. It was not always so for pits. Pit bulls were cover dogs three times over in *Life* magazine—featured because they were winsome, not because they were wicked. (*Ourselves* 115)

There are three pit bulls in the corpus, and two are crossed with another breed, softening the edges to some extent. Two are puppies—Tulip in Jenn McKinlay's *About a Dog* and Annie in *Hope Flames*—which, again, softens the negative associations. The only adult is Lucky from *Carolina Dreaming*, who is deployed to mirror and reinforce the protagonist's outsider status. None of the three are introduced as happy, healthy, loved family members—each are strays, devoid of not only social status but social networks as well. Annie arrives as "one tiny and

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[13] According to registrations with the AKC: www.akc.org/expert-advice/news/labrador-retriever-most-popular-breed-29th-year-row/ Data analysed by pet business insurance provider Protectivity is here: www.akc.org/expert-advice/news/labrador-retriever-most-popular-breed-29th-year-row/

[14] According to breed registrations with The Kennel Club: www.thekennelclub.org.uk/media-centre/breed-registration-statistics/ and lists compiled by groups such as pet insurance company Lifetime Pet Cover: www.lifetimepetcover.co.uk/pet-advice/news/2020s-most-popular-dog-breeds-in-the-uk/.

filthy pit bull puppy someone had found in a ditch. She was a mass of flea-bitten adorable, a brown-and-white baby who'd either been abandoned or lost" (5).

Additionally, each of these three books explicitly addresses the elephant in the room, or, rather, the pit bull on the page. When Tulip is discovered in an alley, she is taken to a veterinarian who says:

> "Here's the other bit of bad news. She's a mutt so it's not like someone lost an expensive pedigree dog and will want her back. She's got the big, blocky head and broad shoulders of an Amstaff, an American Staffordshire terrier, and the shorter nose of a Boxer, but whatever else is in there, I have no idea."
>
> "Wait. She's part 'pit bull'?" Mac asked. She looked at the adorable goofball in her arms. She had heard stories of pit bull attacks and she remembered how she'd felt when Tulip had first growled at her. Scared.
>
> "Yes, it's a pretty umbrella term that covers a couple of breeds, but her head and shoulders are definitely from that lineage," Gav said. "If she goes to a shelter she has a one in six hundred chance of being adopted, which means she'll likely be euthanized." (104)

Here, Gavin the veterinarian starkly outlines the implications of the pit bull's low social standing on her future—Tulip's breed practically guarantees she'll be killed. The paratext also responds to the pit bull's damaged reputation: the cover for *Hope Flames* features a different dog character from the story, Boomer the German shepherd; the cover for *About a Dog* sports the pit bull puppy in the distance; and the cover for *Carolina Dreaming* features a healthy German shepherd instead of the "lean, mean, scruffy … pit bull-shepherd mix" featured in the novel (28) (see fig. 9). Yet pit bulls and other unpopular breed dogs are provided with one thing a dog brimming with high class and prestige is not: the opportunity to display appealing behaviours and thereby disrupt negative breed expectations. All three pit

bulls take to pet life well, all three are affectionate, and all three display protective behaviours in the presence of an antagonist. Anne, Tulip, and Lucky create their own supply of positive regard.

Fig. 9. Covers of novels featuring pit bulls. Left: *Carolina Dreaming* by Virgina Kantra, featuring Lucky, a "pit bull-shepherd mix," depicted on the cover as a healthy German shepherd. Middle: *About a Dog* by Jenn McKinlay, featuring Tulip, a pit bull cross boxer puppy. Right: *Hope Flames* by Jaci Burton, which features a pit bull cross puppy, but German shepherd Boomer is depicted on the cover.

Breed as Character Template

No other element of a dog character's construction carries as much load as their breed. Writers draw on society's understandings, valid or not, of each breed's specific behavioural traits to produce a basic character template. As Frow argues, "[f]ictional characters are formed on the basis of folk taxonomies, including such forms of everyday knowledge as … notions of the racial or historical 'type'" (118). When the fictional character is a dog, the equivalent to racial and historical type is the selection of breed. When an author chooses a breed, whether deliberately or inadvertently, they take a shortcut to communicate ideas about the character and to enable the reader to recognise the dog character—a shared, cultural

understanding of the appearance and personality to expect. Mae et al. researched attitudes to pinpoint the trait people attribute most commonly to dog breeds and found: poodle = spoiled, Doberman = aggressive, cocker spaniel = friendly, bulldog = lazy, Chihuahua = nervous, golden retriever = intelligent, Jack Russell terrier = hyper, collie = heroic (231). Although these findings were merely to provide a baseline for their further research on trait transference, they show how deeply the associations between traits and breed run. Reflections of these trait associations can be found scattered across the corpus: the only cocker spaniel in the corpus, Muffin from Johns's *A Dog and a Diamond*, is very friendly, and 'aggressive' Dobermans are missing from the corpus altogether.

The American Kennel Club has "temperament standards" for each breed, such as: "The Border Collie is energetic, intelligent, keen, alert, and responsive." Of the seven border collies in the corpus, five (three working farm dogs, one pet, and one stray who is adopted as a pet) exhibit all of the traits in the AKC temperament standard. That is, they are quintessential border collies. The remaining two display behaviours that are within expectations of the breed, but in ways that are problematic for the human characters. Oreo, from Roxanne Snopek's *Forever Yours, Sweetheart*, is energetic and badly behaved, causing mayhem during the story. Towards the end of the book, Oreo's antics are a threat to several dogs and a child, and the situation is contained by two Belgian Malinois characters (who are "naturally protective … without being overly aggressive [and are] quick and responsive to commands" according to the AKC). The text makes clear that Oreo's behaviour is the fault of his owners. As the chaos dies down, the story's hero, Ethan, speaks to the child-owner: "'Border collies can be quite a handful,' said Ethan quietly. 'If you want help training him, let me know'" (170), further identifying that Oreo's unacceptable conduct is in keeping with his expected breed behaviour, which has simply been left to develop in an unacceptable manner. The second border collie in the corpus who is problematic for the human characters

is Bessie, in Lennox's *Mardie and the City Surgeon*. Bessie is blind, and her lack of sight impairs her ability to work on a farm. The heroine Mardie believes Bessie's need to conform to (Mardie's version of the) breed expectations is so strong that she questions whether Bessie's life is worth living if she cannot: "[s]he's been bred to work. … She's not meant to spend the rest of her life in a basket by the fire and I won't do it to her." (269) Not only has Bessie been reduced to her breed, but she has been reduced to a folk theory of the breed. If she can't engage in behaviours that Mardie expects from a border collie, she's left with few options. Each of the seven border collies in the corpus thus behaves in ways that are in keeping with the AKC's temperament standards, be they working dogs, or the untrained Oreo, or Bessie, whose future is determined by her ability to perform shepherding duties.

The drawback with using breed as template for character type is that it strips the character of individuality. Even in the real world the "canine breed system or, more precisely, the division of the bewildering array of the world's dogs into haphazardly sorted and named family groupings" (McHugh *Dog* loc 799) is an unreliable predictor of personality. Lindsay R. Mehrkam and Clive D.L. Wynne reviewed a broad range of existing research and data and concluded that "breed standards are largely unsubstantiated, for most breeds that have been studied" (24). For example, despite the AKC temperament standard stating that the "English Cocker is merry and affectionate, of equable disposition, neither sluggish nor hyperactive, a willing worker and a faithful and engaging companion," Mehrkam and Wynne note that the "breed is often ranked as among the most likely to be seen by veterinarians and behaviorists for human-directed aggression" (25). They further observe that "substantial within-breed differences in behavior also exist—even in the most controlled experimental studies" (25). Or, as Horowitz puts it, "[i]n our perseverance in talking about breed, in our foregrounding of typology, we're missing each dog for who they are. Yes, each dog is a member of a species, a breed (or a mix)—but an individual most of all. … Having a dog of a particular breed seems

to assure predictability but it does not" (*Ourselves* 111). When a dog character defies society's breed expectations it is the start of individuality, of understanding the dog character, in Horowitz's words, "for who they are."

The AKC itself acknowledges that breed is no guarantee for a dog's behaviour, by listing personality traits that are to be rewarded and others to be penalized in competitive judging, meaning all of these traits are present in the dogs of the breed. They are describing their ideal dog, not the only iteration possible for the breed. The AKC standard for dachshunds reads: "The Dachshund is clever, lively and courageous to the point of rashness, persevering in above-and below-ground work, with all the senses well-developed. Any display of shyness is a serious fault." Silver dapple, longhaired dachshund Spot (later Steve) in *Faking It* plays against type, displaying traits closer to the shyness that the AKC recommends penalizing than to the breed ideal: "Spot looked up at her now, shaking, almost as pathetic as he was ugly" (3); "She crouched down on the worn Oriental rug to pet Spot, who backed away, still heaving, his eyes peeled for a getaway" (7); and "Tilda … hauled the frantic dog up to her shoulder to comfort him as he began to hyperventilate again" (51). Spot's deviation from the breed standard of "lively" and "courageous" communicates a distinctive character, one who is not interchangeable with another dachshund in the corpus, and whose behaviour is not predictable. He is an individual.

A breed designation provides a recognisable character type, a shared understanding of who the dog will be and what behaviours will be in their repertoire—cocker spaniels are considered friendly, border collies considered intelligent and energetic, and Great Danes considered spirited and disobedient. The risk, however, in relying on breed for the dog character's personality, of not fleshing it out with contradictions, is a loss of distinctiveness.

Crossbreeds

McHugh writes that "[t]he stigma of worthlessness, ugliness and randomness haunts the non-breed dog" (*Dog* loc 1722). The purebred dog, in contrast, claims the traits that the crossbreed lacks: worth, beauty and purposefully chosen genes. These dichotomies of pure/impure, high class/low class, expensive/cheap also provide opportunities to play with or overturn expectations. Charlie, in Jessica Hart's *Newlyweds of Convenience*, has "a Labrador's soft ears, a collie's intelligent eyes and the bristly coat of a lurcher, but [is] otherwise a standard, scruffy mongrel" (8). The book's hero comments to Mallory, Charlie's owner, "'I would have expected [your] dog … would be a pedigree, something elegant and a little aloof—like a saluki, perhaps. Charlie is a nice dog,' he said, 'but he doesn't fit with your image at all'" (42). He elaborates that Mallory is "elegant," "stylish," and "sophisticated" (42), all words that equate with quality, implying that crossbreed Charlie is none of those things. McHugh posits that "[i]n part, the mutt's physical ugliness serves as a ruse for the beauty of his character. The non-breed dog's usefulness comes as a surprise, a revelation of true character" (*Dog* loc 1765). The hero's assurance that Charlie is "nice" while explaining his commonness chimes with McHugh's point, and does indeed correspond to Charlie's personality—his "unwavering trust and affection" (22) and help with Mallory's past emotional healing displays the 'beauty of his character.'

The mutt also arrives on the page without the benefit of narrative efficiency; the mutt makes more demands on the reader for attention and interpretation. A purebred can be described with the few words taken to name their breed, such as when police dog Boomer is introduced in *Hope Flames*: "She hurried out to see a man holding a German shepherd by the leash" (6). Beyond the text identifying him as a police dog, no more detail is given or needed to provide a visual picture or Boomer's character type. There is no luxury of such a shortcut for the mixed-breed dog, which, by definition, necessitates more focus in the narrative to

create both a visual and a personality profile, signalling individuality. The first time Sarah catches a glance of a stray dog (later named Franny) in Susan Wiggs's *Just Breathe*, the dog is described as "a shy-looking mongrel … furtively looking for scraps" (84), and two pages later she appears again when "[t]he black-and-white dog feinted away from a group of boys horsing around, and darted out into the street" (86). When Sarah meets her again in a park, Franny has "soulful, brown-eyed gaze" and "a worried frown [that] deepened the crease between those soft, pleading eyes," and emits "a Lassie-like whine" (165). A week later, after the dog has followed her home, Sarah thinks: "She was a female under the long, brindled fur, and was really quite beautiful now that her coat was clean and shiny" (170). The extra words it takes to establish the basic visual image, behaviour and personality places more emphasis on the character than if Franny had been simply introduced as, say, a dachshund.

Through their exclusion from the typology of the breed system, mutts are released from the expectation to perform a breed and are free to act in distinctive ways. Eight of the nine adult and senior Labradors in the corpus perform Labrador—true to form, they have a "kindly, outgoing, tractable nature; eager to please and non-aggressive towards man or animal [with] gentle ways, intelligence and adaptability" (AKC Breed Standards, Labrador). The ninth, Frank from Rachel Bailey's *Tempted by the Wrong Twin*, has a complex backstory and is depressed during much of his story, but once his character arc is complete he performs Labrador along with the eight other adults and seniors. Four of the five Labrador puppies and adolescents perform a puppy version of the breed: they display the expected temperament along with puppy antics. The fifth, Daisy from Mann's "Home for Christmas," has both a black coat and a complex backstory, and performs against breed for much of the story; however by the end, once she has a child of her own again, she performs Labrador. In contrast, Buster from Donna Alward's *Somebody's Baby*, is only part Labrador. "The dog was a mutt from the looks of it, with the beard and eyebrows of a terrier and the size and coat

of a lab" (8). Buster is variously: well behaved—"Buster followed politely" (61); obedient—"He gave a whine and dropped at her feet, arranging his front paws so he was comfortable … She felt guilty being so stern, but it had worked" (67); stubborn—whining to sleep on the human's bed until successful—"How could she say no to that? He was…lonely" (70); and destructive—"'He crapped on one of my favorite shoes, and peed on my stool, chewed through his bag of food, and now there's kibble all over the kitchen, ate one of my handbag straps, and pulled my laundry basket with my newly-clean clothes off the sofa and now they're all over the goddamn floor!'" (76). Buster performs neither Labrador nor terrier, his mixed lineage allowing him the freedom to enact unexpected behaviours and transcend character type.

Crossbreed dogs are individuals, existing beyond the taxonomy of the purebreds, and it is precisely what they lack—high class, narrative efficiency, and a recognisable character type—that grants their individuality, and signals that they have the potential for complexity.

Conclusion

In establishing a dog character, no element is more important than breed. For some dog characters, their entire personality is implied through simply naming their breed, which has the advantage of narrative efficiency, but risks an undeveloped character that is interchangeable with other characters from the same breed. However, breed does provide a system of character types, which are an efficient way for the dog to be introduced on the page, forming something of a template of character. The breed dog's character can be fleshed out by layering other traits and behaviours onto the template, and also by constructing a dog who plays against type—that is, one who performs dog in a way that is unusual for a dog of that breed. Either way, purebred status grants the dog social standing—something that can be increased by choosing a breed which is popular. Crossbreeds, on the other hand, are released

from the expectation to perform their breed and are therefore freer to show a multi-layered personality and behave in unexpected ways.

4: BACKSTORY

"His thick fur covered the resulting scar, but she could still feel it": Potential and Imperatives for Change in Backstory.

Introduction

Humans judge dogs by their history. In no place is this more evident than at animal shelters where a dog's history has life and death consequences. Protopopova et al. analysed numerous variables across 180 dogs in a Florida shelter, including dog size, kennel position, breed, mode of intake, and the ability to hold human gaze. They concluded that a dog's breed and background "were the only factors that influenced adoption success" (67). Specifically, "[c]onfiscated and stray dogs had less adoption success than dogs relinquished by their owners. … These findings reinforce survey reports that people prefer dogs that were surrendered by their owner" (66). Results from this research, alongside the findings of large studies by both Jamie L. DeLeeuw and Lepper et al., show that people prefer dogs whose past was in a home over dogs who were homeless, as well as dogs who were owned by financially or time-poor humans over dogs who had displayed bad behaviour. A dog's history, then, is ascribed both meaning and value.

That same interpretive response is also applied to fictional dogs—a dog character's history before the story starts, or its backstory, is laden with coded information. This section argues that the inclusion of a complex, distinctive backstory for a dog character signals the possibility of a round character who will play an active role in the plot. Further, a backstory which embeds conflict is the key indicator that a fictional dog will have character growth.

Inclusion of Backstory

Possession of a backstory, or a history prior to the plot's beginning, is crucial in a fictional

character. Frow argues that "[t]o be a character is to have a textual existence and, momentarily, to appear to exist beyond it" (296). Backstory is the mechanism that takes the character's existence in the direction of the past. Tara Mokhtari explains, "[w]hen we first encounter a character in a story, we assume the character came from somewhere, had earlier experiences, lived in their world actively before the point at which the story began" (111). As dogs have the capacity to live actively in their worlds and accumulate experiences, a fictional dog similarly has the capacity to have accrued a backstory. The inclusion of that backstory indicates the fictional dog is a character in the story, not merely a prop or walk-on part.

In Debra Salonen's *Love, By George*, the novel's opening lines deliver a fragment of George's backstory:

> "Oh, George, what have you done? Are you trying to get me arrested for dognapping?"
>
> The six-year-old Harlequin Great Dane dropped to a crouch, his gaze not meeting hers. Kara Williams's heart just about broke in half. She loved animals, and this big galoot was one of her favourite clients at The Paws Spa, her Pine Harbor, Oregon, pet-grooming business. He'd been one of her regulars until his owners, Brad and Lynette Ralston, split up. Now, Brad, who had custody of George and the couple's teenage son, routinely missed George's standing appointment. (7)

George's character is succinctly yet comprehensively introduced, not only with his name, age, appearance, breed, and gender, but also with several pieces of his history: the names of both human owners, that their marriage has ended, that they have a teenage son, that George used to be a regular client but is now missing appointments, and that he is one of Kara's favourite clients. The first scene from the hero's point of view provides further details of George's backstory:

> George was Brad's *other* problem child. Only, he was a four-legged one. "A

> boy needs a dog," Lynette had claimed. "You're so busy with work Justin is lonely," she'd added, twisting the guilt knife a little deeper in his ribs.
>
> So she'd searched online until she found a breeder who sold them a registered Harlequin Great Dane puppy. (23)

Mention of George's backstory early in the novel, by both protagonists, signals that this dog will be more than a prop in service to the human players: he will be a character in his own right. Correspondingly, during the story George not only has agency and a multifaceted personality, but his actions affect the plot enough that George's presence is crucial to the narrative.

For some dog characters, their history is unknowable. If the dog enters the story as a stray, for example, their past, almost by definition, is a mystery. For these dogs, speculation on their unknown past by other characters serves a similar function as possessing a backstory. Sugar in Foster's *Cooper's Charm* is a stray, rescued from a group of men tormenting her. The human characters, Cooper and Phoenix, speculate about her backstory and deduce some elements. On the morning after the rescue, Cooper shares details of Sugar's first night:

> "Soon as I let her into the room, she ran around all crazy, on the bed, under the bed, into the connected bathroom. She kept going until she found the closet door open enough for her to burrow in." He shrugged. "She didn't come back out."
>
> Phoenix reseated herself, then lifted the dog into her lap. "She probably had to hide at night, you know?" *From cruel men, as well as natural predators.* God, how she hated that thought.
>
> "That's what I figured." (131)

As Phoenix takes the information from Sugar's current behaviour and extrapolates from that to create a theory of her backstory, Sugar's character is deepened and stretched to exist before the story began. It is perhaps unsurprising then that Sugar's role in the story is vital: at the

climax of the plot, Sugar alerts the other characters that Phoenix is in danger.

The converse situation, where the dog's history is neither disclosed to the reader nor speculated on, indicates a character that will be less developed and less crucial to the plot. Otis the twelve-month-old Great Dane in Burton's *Love Me Again* is present in many scenes during the novel, but he has no distinguishing traits, limited agency and does not affect the plot. Despite having twelve months' worth of history and his adoption scene being partially dramatized on the page, he also has no backstory. The heroine's daughter introduces Otis to the hero with the line: "His name is Otis. He's a Great Dane and he's almost a year old. So he's like still a puppy" (32). Otis conforms to the 'naughty puppy' character type. The hero helps the heroine's daughter to train him, providing Otis with the role of bringing the heroine and hero together, but his role could have been performed by almost any of the 'naughty puppy' characters from the other texts in the corpus. Salonen's George and Foster's Sugar, by contrast, are not interchangeable with any other dogs. The inclusion of their backstory, or speculation about the unknowable backstory, is a cue to the reader that George and Sugar have been written as minor characters. Otis, with his lack of backstory, despite receiving more page space than Sugar, remains a walk-on part, effectively an element of setting. A writer's decision to explore a dog's history on the page grants that dog the potential to be a developed character.

Complexity and Distinctiveness

Beyond the mere inclusion of a dog character's past on the page, a backstory that has multiple, rich layers signals the possibility of a round character. In the real world, the development of a dog's personality is as dependent on her/his past experiences as on genetics. Horowitz notes:

> dogs, like us, are more than their genome. No animal develops in a vacuum: genes

> interact with the environment to produce the dog you come to know. … Even a cloned dog, should you be tempted to replicate your beloved pet, will not be identical to the original: what a dog experiences and whom he meets will influence who he becomes in innumerable, untraceable ways. (*Inside* 51)

Horowitz's identification of the origin of canine personality in the fusion of genetics and past experiences is reinforced by Lindsay R. Mehrkam and Clive D.L. Wynne, who conclude that dog "behaviour is the outcome of complex interactions of phylogeny and ontogeny" (25). A character whose past is ignored and whose behaviour rests solely on genetics (e.g. breed) will be underdeveloped. Showing both backstory and genetics is a declaration that the dog character's full personality is being considered.

Mooch, from Alexis Morgan's *A Time for Home*, has a multifaceted backstory, and this history is privileged in the text as much as the human characters'. Soldier Nick has brought Mooch back to the U.S. from Afghanistan to find him a home. The heroine Callie is already aware of some of Mooch's backstory:

> After all, the dog was a real-life war hero. Spence had told her all about how the dog had warned his unit about a shooter lying in wait for them. No one knew why a stray would single them out to help, but he had. Not only that, but Mooch had gotten shot in the process. His thick fur covered the resulting scar, but she could still feel it. (43)

Mooch's backstory contains specific, unique experiences. Additionally, before the story begins, Mooch had developed relationships with human characters:

> "Spence was the one who insisted on adopting Mooch after the dog saved us. It was touch-and-go that first night even after the vet treated Mooch. Although the bullet didn't hit anything vital, the wound bled a lot, especially for a dog his size. Added to that, Mooch was half-starved and filthy, so it was anybody's guess what kind of germs were embedded in the wound." …

> "Once we knew the dog would actually make it, Spence started worrying about what would happen to him when our deployment ended. He called in every favour he could to make the arrangements to ship Mooch back to the States. He wanted to give that idiot fur ball a chance to live a long and lazy life, hopefully here in Snowberry Creek."
>
> Nick finally turned to face her. "When Spence was killed, Leif and I couldn't stand for that dream to die along with him." (59)

These relationships from the past become the building blocks of Mooch's character system in the novel's present. He has 'war buddy' relationships with Nick and Leif, and he quickly forms a bond with Callie, in part because Callie views Mooch as a link to her dead friend Spence. Mooch's reactions to the setting are also impacted by his backstory:

> Mooch stopped at the edge of the woods and waited for Nick to catch up. The dog seemed to enjoy exploring this new world, but he preferred to have Nick along for backup. They both had a lot of adjusting to do to get in synch with living outside of a war zone.
>
> Nick didn't know about Mooch, but he didn't miss the background sounds of gunfire and explosions. On the other hand, it was hard to get used to so much quiet. They'd both been living with the constant adrenaline rush that came from being on high alert twenty-four/seven. At least they were both less jumpy now than when they'd first landed stateside. Nick would take any progress back toward normal that he could get. (29)

Nick and Mooch have shared history which impacts the behaviour of both. Living the quiet life in an American small town is a difficult adjustment; however, when it becomes apparent a stalker is lurking in the nearby woods, the skills and instincts man and dog have gained from past experiences become valuable. They are both able to perform protective actions and

call on their prior working relationship to operate as a team.

Mooch's backstory has depth and individuality: he was neither a military dog, nor a 'normal' stray. He was a stray in a warzone who was made "an official member of the squad" (55). Mehrkam and Wynne define dog personality "as behavioral characteristics of individuals that are consistent and generalizable across settings" and are developed through the "interaction between temperament and the environment" (15). As Siettou et al. explain, "dogs are living creatures whose dispositions, attitudes and existence heavily rely on the environment and circumstances in which they are brought up and live" (144). The link between Mooch's history and his current personality is displayed regularly—his actions and reactions to other characters, the setting, and events are all inextricably linked to his past experiences. His backstory is an embedded signal that this dog will be a round character. Indeed, Mooch displays agency and is capable of contradictory behaviour that is nonetheless consistent with his backstory. When Nick is suffering symptoms of his PTSD, he notes that "[e]ven Mooch watched him with that amazing stillness he sometimes had when he sensed someone was hurting." (249) Despite their closeness, when Nick "tried to snag Mooch's collar, the dog snapped at him and danced out of reach" (31). At times, the human characters trust Mooch's decisions over their own, such as when tracking an intruder: "The dog stalked down off the porch, his nose in the air as he tested the breeze. Nick waited until his partner made up his mind which way to go before following" (98). A richly drawn backstory contributes to a character that is multifaceted and capable of surprise, and who has unique relationships with the other main characters. Mooch is not merely granted a backstory, but a history that is complex and distinctive, and his past experiences directly result in behaviours and actions he performs in the narrative. In the real and fictional worlds, past experiences are part of what creates personality, or a developed character.

Creating Imagined Futures

Lisa Fletcher argues that in the romance genre, "just as the Happy Ever After makes readers a promise about the future of fictional lovers, there are always also lines of causality going in the other direction as well, towards the characters' imagined pasts" (9). The inclusion of a dog character's backstory is a performative act, bringing that "line of causality" into existence. The backstory not only reaches back into the character's past, it creates space in the narrative for the character's future self: once the line has been created, the character is no longer a static element, but one who will interact with the events of the plot in unexpected ways, and, crucially, has an imagined future beyond the narrative.

In "Home for Christmas," the plot follows shelter volunteers on a road trip to deliver three dogs to their new homes. The shelter manager introduces the first dog as she passes him to the volunteers:

> "This is Trooper. We're pretty sure he's a beagle/basset mix, around two years old. Animal control picked him up wandering without a collar or microchip. He's such a sweetie they called us with a hefty plea to take him in." (179)

In the short passage, Trooper's name, age, gender, breed, and short backstory are delivered. The second dog is then introduced:

> The teenager in a long-sleeved concert tee carried a Pekingese. "Prince is eight years old." She rested her cheek against his fur, her blond ponytail swishing forward. "His owner had to go into a nursing home and no one else in the family would take him." (179)

Again, the text reveals Prince's name, age, gender, breed, and a snippet of backstory. The lines following also give insights into his appearance, such as him being a "fur ball." Finally, the third dog is introduced:

> Before Shelby could offer to hold Prince, Tansy passed her the other leash of a black

Lab puppy.

> "And this is Daisy." Tansy's brow furrowed, her eyes sad. "Daisy was brought in with her mother and the rest of her litter when she was only two days old. Daisy was the last of her litter, adopted at twelve weeks old, but her family returned her when she was five months. They said they didn't have time for her. She really misses the family that gave up on her, and she hasn't warmed up to anyone since. She's been here almost four months this go-round." (180)

Like the other two dogs, Daisy is introduced with name, age, gender, breed, and backstory, and, like Prince, she has a hint of appearance (though her colour). However, her backstory is more developed than Prince's and Trooper's. Of the three dogs, Daisy is marked as special. A few scenes later, Trooper meets the family who applied to adopt him, and the family declares, "We love him already" (198). The next day Prince meets his prospective adoptive family, who already have three dogs. All three are dressed in homemade Christmas sweaters and booties, and there is a set waiting for Prince as well. Within minutes, Prince is wearing the matching sweater and playing with his new pack. Trooper and Prince have seamless, fast adoptions and their actions do not affect the plot, yet Daisy is different. On the first night of the road trip, Trooper and Prince trail Shelby around the motel room, but Daisy is "uninterested in having anything to do with [her] or the other dogs" (184). Later, when Prince meets his new family, Daisy surprises Shelby by playing in the snow with some children. "Grumpy Daisy, who would refuse a squeaky toy soaked in beef broth, was downright prancing around two elementary-aged kids waddling in thick snow-suits" (208). Soon after, Daisy runs at a coyote to protect the children, is seriously injured in the fight, and needs immediate surgery. Her prospective adoptive family backs out, leaving Daisy to attend Shelby's family Christmas gathering, where Shelby's father comments that Daisy is "the saddest-looking puppy I have ever seen" (248). However, when she meets Shelby's eleven-

year-old special needs step-brother, Daisy again transforms—"Patrick squealed, kneeling in the snow with Daisy dancing around him, licking his face" (249)—and is subsequently adopted by Patrick's family. Prince and Trooper are static characters. Daisy's backstory creates the line of causality for her character, reaching from events before the narrative begins through the events of the plot, to her Happily Ever After where she chooses, and is chosen by, a special needs child: "Daisy, who innately loved children, would always cherish the little boy within Patrick no matter how tall or old he grew" (249). Daisy's rich backstory signals her potential to be a more rounded character than Prince or Trooper, and that she could have an imagined future beyond the confines of the narrative.

Embedded Potential for Character Growth

Perhaps the greatest contribution a backstory can make to a dog character is to grant them the possibility of character growth, and, in the case of a backstory that leaves the dog with internal conflicts, an imperative for that growth. Character transformation is especially relevant in the genre of popular romance novels. Catherine Roach argues that "[a] romance is a story about how to get to a healing end—an eschaton of love, commitment, completion, fulfillment, happiness, generational continuity, maturity, and hope" (5). The romance genre does not confine its Happy Ever After endings to the main couple's love story—subplots of romances between secondary characters commonly receive a HEA, as do non-romance subplots, including those centred on character growth. In Lynne Graham's *The Greek's Christmas Bride*, the heroine's dog Hector suffers from anxiety: "Hector was scared of just about everything life threw at him. People, other animals, traffic and loud noises all made the whites of his eyes glean with an edge of panic" (15). The hero Apollo patiently wins him over in parallel to winning over the heroine.

> Apollo had already laid the trail and Hector was becoming an old hand at

following treat trails.

> The scruffy little animal crept out from his roofed hidey hole of a basket and snuffled up the treats, inching half under Apollo's desk while Apollo pretended to ignore his progress. Every week the little terrier dared to move a little closer to the male who terrified him—not that Apollo took that personally. Hector was uniformly terrified of every man that came into his vicinity and considerably more trusting of the female sex. He had first bonded with Pixie in the vet surgery where his injuries had been tended. Pixie had worked next door and, being friendly with the veterinary nurse, had often visited the homeless dogs in their cages. Although Pixie had worked and did not have a garden, the vet had deemed her a good prospective owner because Hector had taken to her immediately. (126)

Hector's traumatic backstory has left him with the internal conflicts of anxiety and distrust of men, and these conflicts implant an imperative for his character growth. During the events of the plot, Hector is propelled towards his version of Roach's "healing end" with its "love, commitment, completion, fulfillment [and] happiness":

> After a noisy pummelling session with his squeaky toy, Hector sneaked across the floor and hovered uneasily near Apollo's feet before he gingerly dropped the toy there. Muttering something shaken in Greek, Apollo stilled and then he bent, scooped it up and threw it and Hector went careening after it. 'He brought the toy to me. He *finally* brought it to me!' he exclaimed in amazement. (163)

Hector's character development was seeded in his backstory, where the line of causality begins, then reaches through the narrative, turning at significant nodes (such as in the first example above where he sneaks the treats), until he displays his growth by bringing the toy to Apollo, and then into the imagined future after the narrative ends. Fletcher suggests that a romance novel's "Happy Ever After … is both the reward for the way that characters

overcome obstacles depicted in the plot, but it is also recompense for the pain or loss of past events or relationships" (9). Hector's HEA is both compensation for his traumatic backstory and reward for his bravery in learning to trust Apollo. Together, these elements (backstory, interaction with plot events, growth, and imagined future) coalesce to form his character arc.

The imperative for character growth that arises from a backstory with internal conflict is strengthened if that conflict is closely tied to the plot. Viggy, the bomb detection dog in Katie Ruggle's *Run to Ground*, is suffering trauma that affects his ability to carry out his duties, granting him the prerequisite for character growth:

> Theo turned toward the kennel on the opposite side of the garage. He took in Viggy's flattened ears and sighed. This wasn't going to go well.
>
> As Theo put on the dog's protective vest and harness, Viggy stood listlessly, his tail tucked. A memory hit Theo like a punch to the belly, a flash of Don prepping Viggy in the same way six months ago, laughing at something Theo had said. For that call, Viggy had been vibrating with excitement, ready to work, so confident and eager and just so fucking *happy*. The passive, dull-eyed dog standing in front of Theo now was just a shadow of that K-9 officer. (46)

The contrast between Theo's memory of Viggy in the past with the dog's current condition dramatizes the internal conflict embedded in the canine character.[15] Discussing film screenplays, Craig Batty argues that "character transformation (arc) is positioned against physical action (plot)," and that "a special relationship exists between plot and character, where character transformation is encouraged to take place within the frame of the physical action of the plot" (2). For Viggy, the establishment of a complex backstory with an embedded internal conflict propels him into a character arc. The backstory reserves space in

[15] Of particular note is that, in this example, the complete backstory is not given at once. It is gradually revealed during the narrative, building mystery and tension—a technique more commonly used for human characters.

the future timeline for the character. Towards the end of the novel, Viggy identifies explosive material during a stressful hostage situation, and he shows the depth of his bond with his new partner when he is able to follow orders, despite the villain being his former partner's daughter:

> "Viggy, hold."
>
> In a flash of fawn and black, Viggy shot forward, latching his jaws around Sherry's right forearm. Yelping, she dropped the phone. As it skittered across the wet pavement, Theo rushed to grab it, and Viggy pulled Sherry to the ground.
>
> "No!" Sherry yelled. "Viggy, stop! What are you doing? You're *our* dog!"
>
> "Not anymore," Theo said, carefully placing the phone into his BDU pocket before heading for Sherry. "He's my partner now." (336)

Viggy is a dynamic rather than static element of the narrative: he moves from a happy, competent K-9 officer in the backstory to a traumatized dog unable to fulfil his duties at the start of the narrative, and then heals until he forms a bond with his new partner and is able to perform his duties again. The events of the plot are closely tied to the internal conflict that Viggy needs to overcome. The final scene shows Viggy happily playing with Theo, the heroine Jules, and Jules's three siblings/wards, granting a glimpse into the future that stretches before the newly formed family. This final image shows Viggy's recompense for the trauma in his past, and the bi-directional line of causality is fulfilled. Viggy's backstory, which produced internal conflict for his character, creates the conditions needed for his character arc, and an imperative for his growth.

Conclusion

A dog's past experiences affect our perception of the dog in the present, and for fictional dogs, it is the backstory which details their past experiences. The dimension of backstory

operates through several modes: the presence of the backstory or speculation regarding the dog's past is the first cue that the character is important to the text; a complex and distinctive backstory signals possibilities of a developed character; a backstory is capable of reaching forward to grant the character an imagined future outside the text; and a backstory that produces internal conflict embeds an imperative for character growth. Romance author Anne Gracie posits that "the back-story in popular romance is crucial, because what has happened to the characters in the past, and how they've interpreted the past, is almost always what is blocking them from getting that happy ending" (Fletcher 9). For dog characters in romance novels, a complex, distinctive backstory that embeds an internal conflict is the key indicator that they will transform through a character arc and receive their happy ending.

5: GENDER

"[P]inned back with a pink bow": Bias and Sexism in Gender Representation

Introduction

The element of gender works in a vastly different way to the other elements of canine character construction. Names, age, breed, appearance, and backstory operate on several levels simultaneously (in the case of names, for instance, these levels include specific name, nicknames, and naming acts), each with embedded signals of complexity and distinctiveness. In contrast, the manner in which the dog's gender is represented, I argue, reduces rather than adds richness to the character. There are significantly more male dog characters than female across the corpus, and, of the works that have only one dog character, there are more with a male than a female dog. Significantly, the male dog characters have more options: they are found in both a wider variety of dog breeds and formal roles (i.e. dog jobs). Drawing on studies of animals in children's books that show strikingly similar findings, in this section I reveal the disparity between the gender groups of dog characters, and position these results in the broader context of gender representation.

Proportional Gender Representation

A significant majority of dog characters in the corpus, 71%, are male (see fig. 10). Gender is the only element of dog character construction that is so heavily weighted in one direction (i.e. the dominance of males) for no discernible narrative purpose. A similarly unbalanced gender distribution of animal characters has been found in children's books (Lee and Chin, Hamilton et al., DeLoache et al., McCabe et al.). Comparisons with children's literature are useful, as McCabe et al. note, "[b]ecause children's literature provides valuable insights into popular culture, children's worlds, stratification, and socialization, gender representation in

children's literature has been researched extensively" (198). Their study analysed 5,618 children's books published across the twentieth century and found that not only were males featured more often as a central character than females (at a ratio of 1.6:1), but when comparing the type of character, that:

> The greatest parity exists for child central characters; the greatest disparity exists for animal characters. Boys appear as central characters in 26.4 percent of books and girls in 19 percent, but male animals are central characters in 23.2 percent of books while female animals are in only 7.5 percent. (209)

Further, while there was some improvement after the 1970s in the parity of gender representations of human characters, "[a]nimals do not exhibit this linear improvement" (218). In their 2019 study, Jackie F. K. Lee and Andy C. O. Chin found that "while the distribution of male and female human character types was quite even …, the number of male animal character types was about twice that of their female counterparts" (55). In contrast to McCabe et al., Lee and Chin compared earlier and more recent books and found "significant regression …, the finding being that more animals were given a male identity in the more recent books" (55).

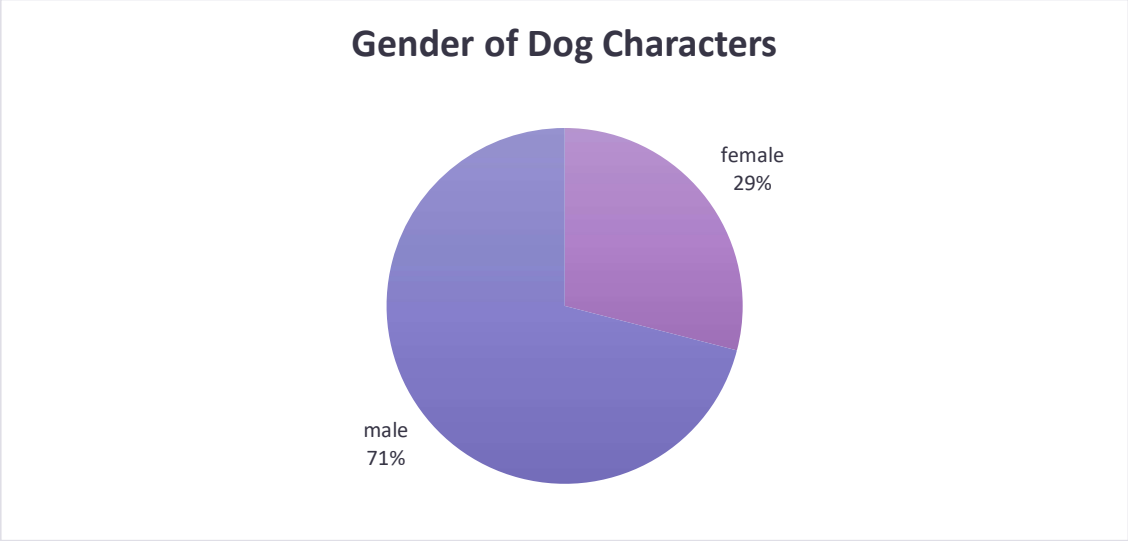


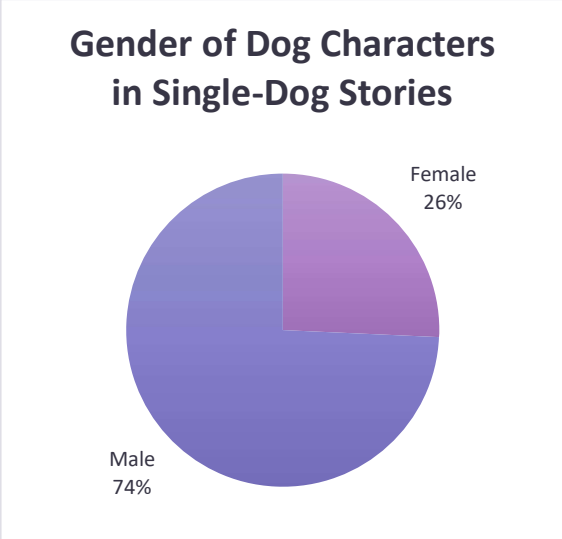
Fig. 10. Gender of dog characters in corpus.

Studies into the masculine bias of parents and teachers found that when reading a book to a child, if the gender of the animal character is not given, the adults tend to assign it as a male (Lambdin et al., DeLoache et al.). Lambdin et al. built on the "person = male hypothesis," where "there is a tendency to assume a person is male unless there is specific information to the contrary" (471) and found that an "animal = male bias exists among young children as well as among adults" (479)—that is, children and adults assume an animal is male unless proven otherwise. Their experiments used gender-neutral depictions of a variety of animals, and their results showed a particularly strong tendency to attribute dogs as male (476).

Worth noting is that the corpus results are from a genre predominantly written by women; however, Hamilton et al. note that in children's books, "[r]esearchers have consistently documented the absence of a relationship between author sex and title/central character sex" (759). Within this larger context, it is perhaps unsurprising that the works across the corpus have imbalanced proportional gender representation, but it is sobering. McCabe et al. argue that "[t]he disparities we find point to the symbolic annihilation of women and girls, and particularly female animals, in twentieth-century children's literature, suggesting to children that these characters are less important than their male counterparts" (218).

Studies of children's literature also show that female characters are more likely to be present on the page as part of a group than as the only character on the page. Gooden and Gooden found "[s]ignificantly fewer female [humans] and female animals appeared alone in the illustrations and significantly more male [humans] and male animals appeared alone in the illustrations than were expected" (95). When the corpus dog characters are analysed through this lens, the gender difference is even more stark. Of the 70 works with only one

dog character 74% are male, and only 26% of standalone characters are female (see fig. 11). Eight books have multiple dog characters of the same gender, and each of those eight books have all-male casts; not one novel or novella in the corpus has two or more female characters, unless a male is also present. In all, 83% of dog characters appearing in a single-gender story (whether one or multiple dogs) are male (see fig. 12). In other words, female dog characters appear more commonly in books with a mixed gender cast of dog characters than as standalone characters or books with other female dogs—the opposite to male dog characters (see fig. 13), and a trend consistent with the gender representation of animal characters in children's books.



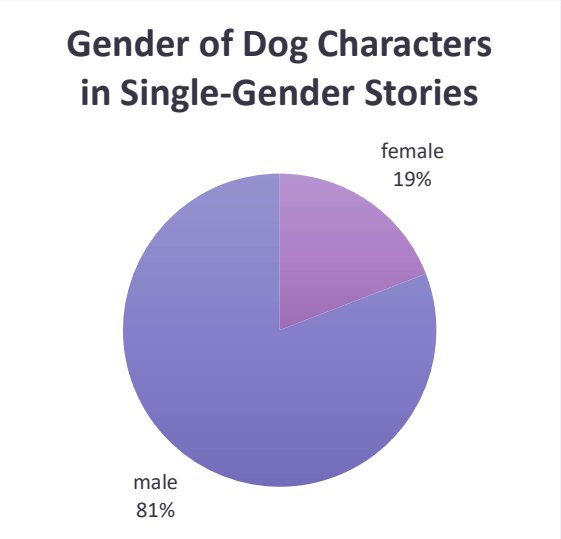


Fig. 11 (left). Gender of dog characters in single-dog stories across the corpus.
Fig. 12 (right). Gender of dog character in stories with any number of dogs, but where all dog characters are the same gender.

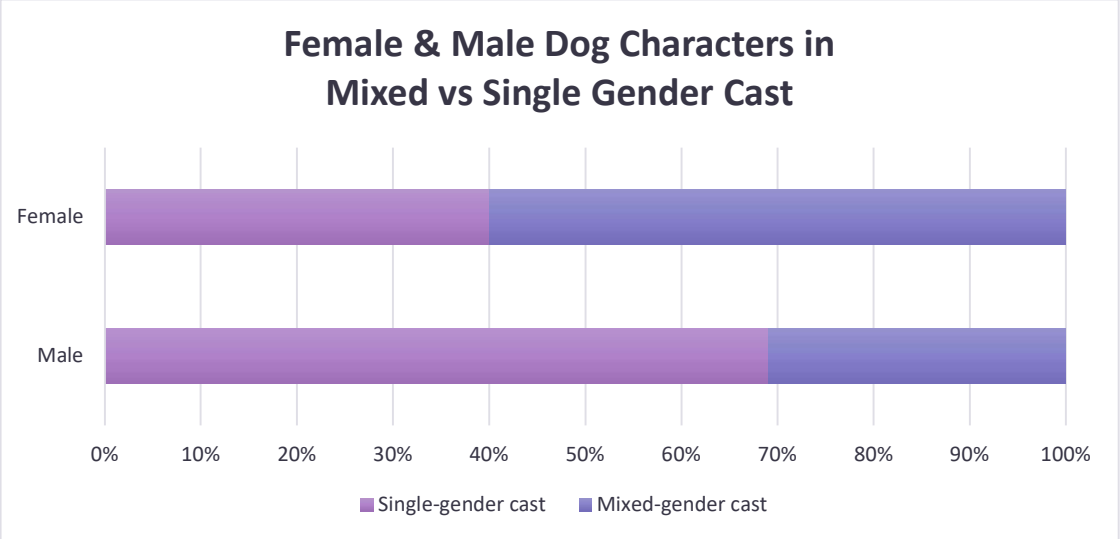


Fig. 13. Comparison of the proportion of female and male dog characters in mixed-gender casts vs single-gender casts (including single dog stories).

Performing Gender

A dog character's type and formal roles are constrained by, and correlated with, their gender. It appears that ideas of what a male and female is and can be are as relevant to our perceptions of non-human animals as for humans. Vint argues that:

> Animals become part of human discourses of gender through language in the prevalent use of animal names as sexual appellations for women (fox, chick, bird) and also in the way domesticated animals are often differentiated by specific terms for the male versus the female of the species (bull/cow, dog/bitch, stallion/mare). … One of the most important points of intersection [between discourses of gender and the human-animal boundary] is the overlap between patriarchal discourses of masculine power and superiority of species discourses of human exceptionalism. (90)

Although reference to a female dog in the corpus as a bitch is rare, differentiation between male and female dogs is not. In some works this is necessary to the plot, for example in a love story between two dogs that leads to puppies, such as that of Mr. Smith and Strudel in

Mayberry's *The Other Side of Us*, but other instances appear to simply be a reflection of ideas of what males and females in general should be and do. All sixteen dogs in the corpus in the group Companion: Giant (breeds such as Great Dane, Saint Bernard, English mastiff, wolfhound, Douge de Bordeaux, Bernese mountain dog, and Newfoundland) are male, revealing an absence of dogs that are both female and giant. In addition, only one of the seven German shepherds and none of the four Belgian Malinois, breeds with strong associations to policing, power, protection, and aggression, are female. The one female German shepherd, Tilly from London's *The Aussie Next Door* is an "old lady" (7), mitigating the aggressive, powerful associations to some extent. The expression of the female gender generally occurs in the corpus within restricted options of size and breed, yet the same is not true in reverse. There are male dogs that are small and non-threatening, such as Chutney, Pickles and Relish in Milburne's *Never Say No to a Caffarelli,* Ozzie the Pekingese in Rolofson's "Secondhand Sam," and Boo from Marina Adair's *Sugar's Twice as Sweet*, who is a "tiny dog covered in white fluff that was teased, sculpted, and pinned back with a pink bow" (32). Canine masculinity, it seems, can be performed across a range of breeds, a freedom not afforded to the female dogs.

A dog character's attractiveness is similarly gendered. Four of the five 'ugly' female dogs discussed in the Appearance section—C.J., Samantha, Tish, and Coco—are unattractive and needy due to health issues or age, with only Katie being relatively self-sufficient (although she enters her narrative as a stray). Two of the unattractive male dogs discussed earlier, Homely/Harry and Lucky, begin their stories as strays, are labelled ugly, and yet possess a scruffy charm. Cricket and Dudley, the only ugly dogs of either gender to already have a stable home at the start of their stories, are also charming and self-sufficient. Spot/Steve is the sole unattractive male who is needy (due to his anxiety). In the corpus, female unattractiveness is more commonly tied to vulnerability than not, and male

unattractiveness is more commonly found in lovable rogue characters. (For a discussion on the intersection of gender with attractiveness and age, see the Age section.)

In the corpus novels and novellas, as in the real world, some dogs have formal roles, or dog jobs. Again, the association between gender and job has strong parallels with children's fiction. Lee and Chin found that "[s]ocial role stereotyping was blatant in our [children's] book sample. Females were seen in a much narrower range of social roles than males … and depicted in traditional jobs such as dancer, dinner lady and nurse" (59, see also Hamilton et al.). Similarly, while nineteen dogs in the corpus have a formal job—including Monty, a service dog for his wheelchair-bound owner in Mann's "Dog Tags," and Titan the bomb detection dog in Valerie Hansen's *Explosive Secrets*—and three more have recently retired or have paused their training for a formal job—including Deputy the retired police dog in Logan's *Slow Dance with the Sheriff*—only two are female. The first is Jess, the working border collie in Lennox's *Falling for Jack*, and the second is Miss Sadie the bichon frise who works with her owner Olivia as part of an animal-assisted therapy team in aged care in Shirley Jump's *The Sweetheart Bargain*. Olivia explains:

> "Sometimes, patients living in retirement homes, nursing homes, rehabs, have trouble getting excited about therapy. They're in pain, or they're depressed, or just plain unengaged. Animals can bridge that divide, and not just get people smiling but encourage them to interact. There's something about handing Miss Sadie a dog biscuit that's so much more fun and rewarding than handing a therapist a toothbrush." (47)

Sadie's job, although not unimportant, is less active and less skilled than the roles other dogs in the corpus have, a point reminiscent of Lee and Chin's findings regarding the "traditional jobs" female characters have in children's books. In contrast, nineteen of the twenty male working dogs hold, or recently held, active roles, such as working on a farm, in search and rescue, or as a guide dog, with only Smiley the PTSD therapy dog in Leanne Banks's *A*

Maverick for the Holidays having a less active job. In terms of breed and size, as well as roles and jobs, a dog's gender affects the options afforded to their character.

Conclusion

Any analysis of gender implicitly or explicitly references a vast history of scholarship and critical discourse in the areas of sexism, feminism, gender studies (and the large subset of these focussing on gender in romance novels), and this current research is no exception. The corpus data shows that discussion of the gender of dog characters in romance novels is located within this broader context: the overrepresentation of male dogs, especially in single-gender stories, certain breed groups, and in the formal work they undertake, fits the patterns found for animal characters in children's books. In terms of canine character construction, this finding is noteworthy as the gender choices are not working to add extra layers of complexity and distinctiveness found in the other elements examined in this thesis. It appears that even in a genre written for women by women, the animal characters are not immune from gender stereotypes and embedded sexism.

6: AGE

"The problem was, cute puppies often grew into giant dogs": Fluctuation of Personality and Potential across Age.

Introduction

Dogs, like humans, pass through phases in their lives, from young, to adult, to senior, and as they grow and mature, both dogs and humans can undergo personality changes. The ages at which a dog is classed as a puppy, adult, or senior are somewhat arbitrary and loose, depending on the source and purpose of the definition, and are influenced by the size and breed of the dog (smaller breeds mature more quickly and generally live longer). In addition, the phase "adolescent" is often used for the age between puppy and full maturation. In this section, I have used these age ranges: puppy: up to 6 months; adult: 6 months—8 years; and senior: over 8 years. An exact age is not always given in the text for a dog character, though other descriptions and textual cues often place them into one of the groups. Sarge in Salonen's *The Comeback Girl* is an "old hound" (29). If no age is given and there are no textual cues that point to the dog being either a puppy or senior, then the dog has been coded as an adult. Of the 155 dog characters across the corpus, 17 (11%) are puppies, 127 (82%) are adults, and 11 (7%) are seniors (see fig. 14). This section argues that the phase of life in which a dog character is located is a significant determinant of their capacity for complexity, and carries embedded potential across a range of areas, from their appeal to humans, to the roundness of their personality, from their capacity to take on formal and informal roles, to the space available in their past for backstory.

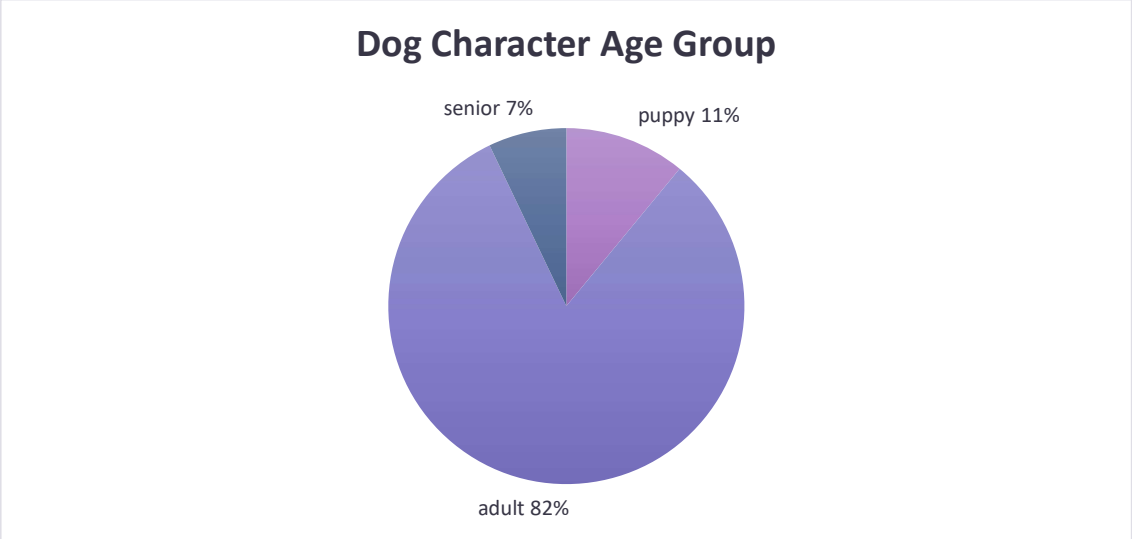


Fig. 14. Distribution of corpus dog characters across age groups.

Puppies

There is little doubt that dog-loving humans like puppies. When the hero in Snopek's *Forever Yours, Sweetheart* fosters a stray mother and her four newborn puppies, the heroine, Carrie, "visited often—puppies were irresistible, after all" (147). Their irresistibility is, in part, due to their appearance. The criteria for attractiveness explored in the Appearance section are exaggerated in puppies: their snouts are shorter which leads to more pronounced paedomorphic facial proportions, their eyes larger, their ears floppier, their coats fuzzier. Jameson, from C. H. Admirand's *One Day in Apple Grove*, is described as "the little fuzzy ball of fur" (39), and when his head is "cocked to the side" his "ears flop to the left" (28). Puppies' appeal—their "irresistibility"—gives them a significant advantage in the life-and-death situation of adoptability. In study after study, puppies are shown to be adopted from shelters more quickly than any other age group (Brown et al. 2, Normando et al. 211). Several of the corpus books dramatise this phenomenon. In *Forever Yours, Sweetheart*, when Carrie considers the fate of the stray mother and her puppies, she thinks: "Despite the mother dog's sweet, trusting nature, they knew that the chances of her being adopted were slim. Puppies

got adopted. Not adult dogs with questionable histories" (144). Puppies such as these newborns and Jameson have been created with inbuilt appeal. Their age makes them attractive to human characters and readers alike. In addition, their presence brings a rich vein of symbolism of new beginnings (a symbolism that a human baby also brings to a story) and the promise of a longer Happily Ever After with the protagonists than a senior dog can provide.

In characterization, a dog's youth overrides other personality traits, leading them to simply perform puppy, instead of displaying a round character. In this way, a puppy golden retriever, such as Fizz from Mackenzie's "The Soldier, the Puppy and Me," has more in common with a puppy from a different breed, such as Beau the bearded collie from Carol Mortimer's "On the Secretary's Christmas List," than with an adult golden retriever. Jamie Fratkin et al. conducted a meta-analysis of 31 studies of dog personality, where personality is defined as "consistent individual differences in behaviour" (1) "across time and/or situations" (1). They found that overall there is "substantial consistency" in dog personality (1), but puppies showed significantly less consistency than adult dogs (14). They reported that the increased consistency of personality as age increased was "in line with previous findings in dogs and humans" (14). The conclusion that puppies show less personality consistency than adult dogs is reflected in romance novels. There are no unique or distinctive characters among the puppies in the corpus, and all are a flat character type. Each of the puppies is limited to displaying one or more types of puppy such as the naughty puppy (being mischievous), the cute puppy (physically appealing both in appearance and expression), the sweet puppy (affectionate), or the "baby" puppy (needing higher levels of care than an adult dog). For example, Fizz can be found causing mayhem (escaping at a parade, chewing on a table), being cute (charming the children who are meeting Santa), and being affectionate (wagging and licking hands). It also means that puppy characters are virtually

interchangeable: the two boxer puppies in Lacey's *For Keeps* are often described in tandem, with no differentiation. For example, "her foster puppies Chip and Salsa lay piled on top of each other" (1), and "Chip and Salsa tumbled onto the floor in a tangle of puppy legs" (2).

The puppies in the corpus are dominated by names that are either are physically descriptive, an emotional mood, a food, or a famous non-human animal: Fizz, Peaches, Hershey, Turbo, Harley, Rowdy, Chip, Salsa, Tulip, and Jaws. Only seven—Tyson, Annie, Moses, Coco, Beau, Buffy, and Jameson—have human names, and four of those are used in a descriptive manner. Tyson and Turbo in Debbie Burns's *A New Leash on Love* were neglected to the point of near-death, and both are given names to reflect their recovery: "'Since he recovered so quickly, Mister Running Legs here will be named Turbo. We're going to call his brother Tyson since he had to fight so much harder to survive'" (131). Moses in Cara Colter's *The Cop, The Puppy and Me* is given the name because he was found floating in a river, and he leads the hero to "the promised land" of the heroine (193). The puppy in *Hope Flames* is given the name Annie because she is "little and orphaned" (14), and Coco in *Just Like Heaven* is a chocolate Labrador. The naming system used further signals that these puppies are unlikely to display a richly drawn character.

Including a puppy character carries the same advantage of casting an attractive dog—humans love puppies, and the puppy will carry the symbolism of new beginnings within the text. However, a puppy will struggle to have any distinctiveness to their personality, and puppy characters are often indistinguishable from each other as they perform various combinations of puppy character types. A puppy, therefore, is likely to be appealing, but also likely to be a flat, interchangeable character.

Adults

Once a dog reaches adulthood, as mentioned above, they become less appealing to humans. In a study of over 3000 dogs in a shelter in California, Merry Lepper and her team concluded that "[t]he likelihood of adoption in dogs decreased with increasing age" (36, see also DeLeeuw, Němcová and Novák, Brown et al., Normando). In *Hope Flames*, when a client bemoans to veterinarian Emma that her adult Newfoundland used to be "'such a cute little puppy,'" Emma thinks that "[m]any people thought puppies were so cute. The problem was, cute puppies often grew into giant dogs" (5). Similarly, in "On the Secretary's Christmas List", the hero comments: "All puppies are cute, Bree … It's what they grow up into that's the worrying part" (23). Despite the decreased appeal, adulthood gives a dog character several advantages, including the capacity to have a rounder character and to take on roles, as well as the enhancement of two other elements: appearance and backstory.

As mentioned above, Fratkin et al. found that adult dogs display more consistent behavioural patterns than puppies. That is, adult dogs have a more distinct personality. In fiction, this translates to the possibility of a more individual and round character. Kevin, the Great Dane in Shalvis's *Always on My Mind*, has a distinct personality, which has the capacity to surprise the reader, and he also a complex character system. He ignores commands from his owner, Jack, which Jack attributes to his breed, yet Kevin obeys both Jack's mother and the heroine Leah. A case in point is the following scene, in which Leah is rubbing Kevin's stomach:

> She pulled a doggie biscuit from her purse, and Kevin wriggled like a beached whale trying to right himself in a hurry.
>
> "Sit," she said firmly.
>
> "He doesn't sit," Jack said.
>
> Kevin sat.

> "Good boy! Oh, what a *very* good boy," Leah said in that high, silly voice that all women used with dogs and gave Kevin another big, warm hug.
>
> Kevin glanced back at Jack, who would have sworn the dog was grinning at him. (193)

In his decision to obey Leah, when he has previously disobeyed Jack, Kevin displays his ability to make choices and assert his agency. He also reveals aspects of personality, such as stubbornness. This roundedness is a factor of his adulthood—Beau the puppy does not display these layers. Kevin's age also allows him to move beyond a puppy's reactive state (as so many experiences are new to them) and develop routines which suit his personal preferences:

> Kevin was an old hat at baseball. He had a routine. Tied to the dugout bench in the shade, he usually dozed through the first few innings, and then by the bottom of the fifth he'd be nosing through the guys' bags for snacks. If he played his cards correctly and gave the right player the puppy dog eyes, he might find a good lap to cuddle in.
>
> No one had ever told him that he wasn't a lap dog. (65)

In the development and repetition of a routine for his time at Jack's baseball games, Kevin again asserts his agency and reveals elements of a round character. His three-step routine isn't interchangeable with the routine another dog character may create—it privileges his own preferences. Further, Kevin is not simply reactive to situations and stimulus like a puppy, he considers options and makes decisions, and those decisions reflect his character:

> Jack woke up before his alarm thanks to a sensation of being crushed. Sitting up, he turned on the light.

> At some point in the night, Kevin had climbed onto the bed with him. The dog lay on his back, all four legs straight up in the air as if he were roadkill, snoring loudly enough to rattle the windows.
>
> He had nearly the entire bed.
>
> "Hey," Jack said and nudged him.
>
> Kevin stopped snoring but didn't move a single muscle.
>
> "I know you're awake."
>
> Kevin slit open one eye.
>
> Jack pointed to the floor.
>
> With a sigh, Kevin heaved himself up and stepped off the bed. He sent Jack one soulful look over his shoulder before heading out of the room. (103)

In his choice to pretend to be still sleeping, a behaviour that is recognisably 'dog' yet uncommon among the corpus characters, Kevin asserts his agency. His actions in this scene and throughout the novel are not interchangeable with other dog characters', and his character system is more complex than that of the puppy characters (who react to other characters in similar ways and are almost universally loved in return). In line with Fratkin et al.'s conclusion that adult dogs have a more consistent personality than puppies, it is Kevin's adulthood that provides the possibility of agency and personality layers.

As adult dogs move into relative independence, they develop the capacity to take on specific roles, and through these roles have the potential to affect the plot and interact with other characters in more meaningful ways. One form of this is the role open to adults of any species—procreation and parenting of their young. Dixie in *Forever Yours, Sweetheart* acts to care for her four newborn puppies, and when a vet checks them over, Dixie is "hovering closely as they handled the puppies" (144). The role may also be a formal job, for example, a guide dog such as Wilbur in Logan's *Awakened by His Touch*, a therapy dog, such as Miss

Sadie who works with the residents of an aged care facility in *The Sweetheart Bargain*, or a police dog, such as Justice in Shirlee McCoy's *Tracking Justice*. When Justice searches for a missing boy, he makes decisions and the human characters follow his lead, and when he finds the boy, Justice leads the child out of a tight cave. He also has a complex character system—he has personal relationships with some characters and a professional relationship with others, such as the mother of the missing boy who he meets while he is working. A role taken by an adult dog can also be less formal, such as providing their owner with protection, a companion, or comfort. John Archer argues that:

> although in general there is evidence to support the commonsense idea that pets are baby and child substitutes, in the case of dogs the nature of the bond is such that it may also contain a strong element of reassurance and a feeling of security; there are, therefore, aspects of a substitute companion or even a parental figure. (241)

He points to survey responses that indicate dogs provide their people with "a source of security in the way that children use parental figures" (241), and argues that in the feelings of a parent for a child, "the dominant feature is caregiving or protecting" and in a child for a parent "it is using the other as a source of security and protection. Relationships between adult sexual partners contain elements of both" (240). It is in adulthood where these dual layers are able to coexist for a dog character. In Hunter's *Wish*, the hero Adam tells his farm dog Blue to stay with the city-bred heroine and her young son on their first night in an isolated cabin. Blue knows "what to do with a king brown or a red-bellied black snake or any one of a dozen other threats Adam could name" (11). When the heroine Billie goes to bed that night, she sleeps "better for knowing that Adam Kincaid's dog was around" (16). In these scenes, Blue is not a child substitute; he has taken the role of a protective parental figure for Billie and her son.

Adulthood gives a dog character an advantage in two other dimensions: appearance and backstory. When dogs grow from puppies to adults, they lose their exaggerated cuteness, but they gain the possibility of a more distinctive appearance. The description of Fizz as a "squirming bundle of golden fur" (261), who displays a "cute little cocked head, sad-eyed look" (306) could describe almost any golden retriever puppy, but the stray golden retriever cross Dixie in *Forever Yours, Sweetheart* has individuality: "She'd been on her own for some time, according to the ribs showing through her scruffy fur. The pads on her feet had heavy calluses, like she'd travelled a long way to find a safe place for her babies" (144). Frow argues that there is "no body that is not marked by its … age" (285), and, as the description of Dixie shows, the canine body is just as susceptible to being marked by its age and experiences. Dixie's post-pregnancy body, ravaged by the need to nurse four puppies when her own food is scarce, shows the effects of her situation. Contrasting with Fizz's body, which is brand new, Dixie's body has been lived in, and displays the evidence.

As discussed in the Backstory section, the presence and complexity of a dog character's history in the text are signals of the possibilities of the character. Adulthood gives a dog character an advantage with this element—their advanced age provides more space in their history for a distinctive backstory to have developed. Although Fizz's exact age is not given, the heroine Ella notes that he is not yet "old enough to learn to follow a few basic commands" (274), but the shelter has sent him out to a foster home without a surrogate canine mother, so it is likely that he is around (or a little older than) weaning age. Only a certain number of experiences can have happened to him in that time, and, indeed, all we are told of his history is that Ella has been fostering him for two days (262). Compare this to Kevin's backstory:

> Kevin had been given to a neighbouring fire station where he'd remained until he'd eaten one too many expensive hoses, torn up one too many beds, and

> chewed dead one too many pairs of boots. The rambunctious one-year-old had then been put up for adoption.
>
> The only problem was that no one had wanted what was by then a hundred-and-fifty-pound nuisance. Kevin had been headed for the Humane Society when Jack, always the protector, always the savior, had stepped in a few weeks back and saved the day. (5)

Too much has occurred in Kevin's history to fit into Fizz's few weeks of life; Kevin's age has given him the space to accumulate an individual backstory.

Embedded within an adult dog character are several layers of potential for complexity. The move from puppyhood to adulthood grants a dog personality consistency, which, in fiction, creates scope for a round character whose behaviours are not interchangeable with those of other dog characters. Additionally, an adult dog has the capacity to take on roles, either formal or informal, and to engage with a human character in a manner which has features of a parent figure, a child, or a companion. The extra timeframe in the adult dog's history also allows room for a more complex backstory, and their adult body may have a more distinctive appearance. Despite their reduced appeal, the potential for a rounded character, the capacity for roles, and the advantages within the dimensions of appearance and backstory, unite within adult dog characters to create possibilities of a richly drawn character.

Seniors

Senior dogs—typically, those over eight-years-old—are the least appealing age group to humans, and have the lowest chance of being adopted from a shelter. Hsin-Yi Weng and Lynette A. Hart studied dog relinquishments to shelters during the 2008-2010 US recession, expecting to find a spike, and instead found:

> that once the guardianship (ownership) of a nonhuman animal had been established, the recession did not greatly affect the owner's decision on relinquishment—except for the relinquishment of senior dogs, which may be associated with increased costs of care. (80)

Moreover, Laura A. Reese et al. found older dogs were so unappealing that they suggested shelters lower the adoption fee for seniors (along with mixed-breed and black dogs) to improve their chance of adoption. The same dynamic is evident in attitudes to senior dogs in romance fiction. When heroine Avery in Kleypas's *Brown-Eyed Girl* meets Coco, a ten-year-old, toothless Chihuahua while taking photos at a shelter, the hero Joe comments: "It's not easy to get someone to take a senior dog. Not much time left, and health problems on the horizon" (170). As Joe implies, a further strike against the senior dog is their inability to provide the puppy's symbolism of new beginnings—they have the least time ahead with the human protagonists in the Happily Ever After. This overall reluctance to adopt a senior is reflected in the pattern of acquirement of older dogs in romance novels. Three dogs, Dudley in *Dishing Up Desire*, Charlie in *Newlyweds of Convenience*, and Rusty in *Old Dog, New Tricks*, all were, or presumably were, adopted when they were young. Of the eight remaining senior dog characters in the corpus, four are/were inherited when their original owner dies/died: Young Pete in RaeAnne Thayne's *Riverbend Road*, Saul in McKinlay's *Barking Up the Wrong Tree*, C.J. in *Dear Cordelia*, and Sarge in *The Comeback Girl*. Another dog character, Samantha in "Secondhand Sam", is one of three Pekingese rescued from a high-kill shelter, and the other two—younger—Pekingese are quickly adopted. The rescuer, Jessica, keeps Samantha when she fails to rehome the dog. Caesar in *The Chocolate Promise* is rescued from abuse, and the hero in *The Aussie Next Door* is only temporarily dog-sitting Tilly. The only senior who is actively chosen for adoption is Coco in *Brown-Eyed Girl* and, even in her case, sympathy plays a factor. Joe tells Avery of Coco's bleak future:

> Coco looked up at me with shining eyes and a gummy grin. I felt a sinking sensation and I thought of what would probably happen to this vulnerable, not-pretty creature.
>
> "If life were simpler…," I heard myself say, "if I were another kind of person…I'd take her home with me."
>
> The shutter clicks stopped. "Do you want to?"
>
> "It doesn't matter. I can't." I was surprised by the plangent sound of my own voice.
>
> "That's okay."
>
> "I have no experience with pets."
>
> "I understand."
>
> I held Coco up and looked at her. She regarded me earnestly with that little-old-lady face, paws dangling, tail wagging in midair. "You have too many problems," I told her. (171)

Coco, with her "too many problems", is the embodiment of Weng and Hart's conclusion that senior dogs are relinquished more often due to the expense they entail, and Reese et al.'s finding that senior dogs are an unappealing option for adoption. Avery's "sinking sensation" about Coco's prospects would seem to be a reasonable reaction.

Senior dogs also face the ever-present spectre of ageism. Becca R. Levy and Mahzarin R. Banaji write that "[b]eliefs about the elderly as unable to contribute to society, and hence as dispensable members of a community, and attitudes toward them of dislike and distancing are prevalent" (49). Although Levy and Banaji refer here to ageism in humans, the small proportion of senior dog characters across the corpus (7%) implies that the bias is as relevant in the canine world. Additionally, as Sandra Barletta argues, senior females are disproportionately affected by ageism, and that aging "becomes something fearful and

monstrous when applied to a woman" (23). Barletta's research revealed a scarcity of female characters over 40 in romance novels, and when they did appear, the older female character was subject to negative portrayals. Of the eleven senior dog characters in the corpus, seven are male and four are female. It is perhaps unsurprising that three of the four senior females, Samantha, C.J., and Coco are unattractive (and were used as examples of unattractiveness in the Appearance section). Young Pete, Saul, Rusty, Charlie, and Sarge have not only avoided a decline in their attractiveness (Young Pete is "a big, furry sweet-tempered guy" (51) and the first of Sarge's features described is a "long, silky ear" (30)), they have also retained their independence—they interact with their owners and other characters in much the same way as dogs from the adult group. Even though Charlie dies toward the end of his novel's narrative, for the majority of his story he is also attractive and independent, and once Caesar recovers from his abuse and neglect, he, too, becomes attractive and independent. Dudley is the only unattractive senior male, with his "belly, ears, and even [his] jowls almost touching the floor" (25), and yet even he is independent and acts protectively towards his owner Kirin on several occasions. In contrast, Samantha, C.J., and Coco each require higher levels of care. Samantha has serious health issues when she is pulled from the high-kill shelter, and in the following weeks undergoes "surgery, shots and [treatment for] an ear infection" (210). Twelve-year-old C.J. has inherited a trust fund to cover the cost of an in-home caretaker. Toothless Coco "can't keep her tongue in" her mouth "so it's chronically dry", which requires Avery to undertake a routine of "massaging it with some organic coconut oil every night, and misting it with water throughout the day" (176). The disparity between the representations of the attractive (six of seven), independent (all seven) senior male dogs and the ugly, needy (three of four) senior females is striking.

The maturity which leads the adult dog to move beyond performing puppy and to develop a consistent personality, and therefore a round character, also lives within the senior

dog. However, this potential is somewhat unrealised in the senior dogs of the corpus. *Brown-Eyed Girl's* Coco displays the most individuality and agency: her favour must be won before she is affectionate, and when Avery is away for two days, Coco refuses to allow any other character to perform the care routines for her tongue. *Dishing Up Desire's* Dudley displays agency to a lesser extent: he doesn't like men and whines when he is ignored. The other nine seniors would be best described as flat characters: for example, Young Pete the Labrador is infallibly happy and friendly, C.J. the basset hound spends most of her day being either affectionate or sleepy. This area of unrealised potential may be a factor of the smaller sample size (only 11 of the 155 dog characters) but is likely also affected by the ageist assumptions which Levy and Banaji note.

Senior dogs have a diminished capacity to take on a formal role—police dogs and guide dogs, for example, have retirement ages. With informal roles, too, age may preclude a senior dog—a frail older dog will have less ability to protect a human character. However, seniors retain the capacity to fulfil roles for which puppies, given their high dependence and immaturity, are unsuited, such as providing companionable nurturing and comfort. When Wynona, the heroine of *Riverbend Road*, considers the logistics of moving to another town to study, she thinks: "Somehow it didn't seem so overwhelming when she considered that at least she would have Pete along for the ride" (272). Similarly, when Avery continues to contemplate adopting Coco in *Brown-Eyed Girl*, she considers the possible roles the dog could play:

> "Can you give me a practical reason for taking this dog home with me? Anything at all? Because she's not big enough to protect me, and I don't need her as a service dog or to herd sheep. So give me a reason. Please."
>
> "I'll give you three. One, a dog will give you unconditional love. Two, having a dog reduces stress. Three. . ." His arm slid away, and he turned my face

> toward his, his thumb stroking the edge of my jaw. He looked into my eyes and smiled. “Hell, do it because you want to,” he said. (171)

Regardless of Avery having no need for a dog with the formal role of service dog or sheep dog, and Coco’s inability to fulfil the informal role of protector, Joe identifies a role that Coco—and, by extension, other senior dogs—is qualified for: a companion.

The adult dog’s advantage in both the appearance and backstory elements are increased for a senior dog, whose body has been lived in longer and displays the effects of that life. Cade, the hero of *Riverbend Road* has known Young Pete for all of the dog’s ten years, and when he pats him, thinks: “He wasn’t a puppy anymore. Gray peppered his muzzle and he walked with the same ginger care of an old man on the cusp of needing artificial knees” (75). Despite not slipping into the unattractiveness of the senior females, Young Pete’s body, in Frow’s terms, is “marked by its … age”, giving him differentiation in his appearance from other yellow Labradors in the adult age group.

Similarly, the longer life preceding the events of the plot gives even greater room than that available to adult dogs for a multifaceted backstory. Young Pete has had a long-term relationship with the police chief Cade: “He and Young Pete went way back, to the days when the dog used to be John Bailey’s constant companion. The former chief had adored the puppy, the latest in a string of dogs he always named Pete” (75). For the dog’s current owner, Wynona, who inherited him from her father, Young Pete had “been their dad’s dog, after all, a link to the man John had been before his traumatic brain injury two years before he died” (43). Young Pete’s longer lifespan has also allowed him to become familiar to the residents of their small town. When the child of a new family is initially frightened of the dog, Wynona notes that she had neglected to attach Young Pete’s leash, as “[s]he forgot there were new people in the neighbourhood who didn’t adore him yet like everybody else did” (51). Young Pete’s backstory is woven through the history of the other characters and the town itself, an

effect achieved, in part, due to his age. The sheer amount of time Young Pete has spent in the town allows for the existence of a more detailed, interwoven backstory.

Senior dogs retain the potential for complexity and agency that exists in adult dogs, for a rounded personality, for taking on some informal roles, and for the distinctiveness of appearance and space for detailed backstory, which places them between puppies and adults in terms of embedded possibilities. However, the senior dogs in the corpus do not display as much agency in their novels as might be expected. This disparity is likely a consequence of the implicit ageism in our society.

Conclusion

In some ways, it is difficult to talk of the phases of a dog's life without superimposing our ideas of the human growth and aging process over the discussion. But as Horowitz warns:

> There is no real life-length equivalence except that we both are born and die. Dogs develop at lightning speed, walking and eating on their own in their first two months; human infants take over a year. By a year, most dogs are accomplished social actors, able to navigate dog and human worlds easily. The average child might be there by four or five. Then dog development slows, while human development skyrockets. (*Inside* 222n)

One thing the two species share is that their capacity and personality are not consistent through the phases of their lifespan, and, likewise, the potential within a dog character varies depending on her/his age. Puppies are overflowing with appeal and symbolism, but their lack of distinctiveness essentially ensures a flat character that could be switched for almost any other puppy character. Adults and senior dogs, on the other hand, possess personality consistency, the capacity to take on a variety of roles and engage on the level of child, parent, or companion, as well as a greater scope for backstory and distinctive appearance. These

features provide adult and senior dog characters with rich potential for roundness, layers and complexity. Despite the overwhelming majority of adult dogs in the corpus, each age group provides the writer with rich possibilities when casting their dog character.

BRIDGING NOTE

The next section of the thesis is the creative artefact that experiments with and establishes my model of dog character construction through practice-led research.

The creative artifact is a work of popular romance fiction titled *Wherever You Are*. It meets the two criteria of the genre stipulated by the Romance Writers of America, the peak industry body for popular romance fiction writers in the USA on their "About the Romance Genre" website page:

> **A Central Love Story:** The main plot centers around individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work. A writer can include as many subplots as he/she wants as long as the love story is the main focus of the novel.
>
> **An Emotionally Satisfying and Optimistic Ending:** In a romance, the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love.

Among the cast of human and non-human characters in the work are thirteen dogs. The dog characters have intentionally been embedded with varying levels of potential for development (with some being undeveloped and other leaning closer to being well-developed) through the application and testing of the model presented in the exegesis. The work also questions and blurs the line between minor human and non-human animal characters, through strategic deployment of the model's dimensions.

The creative artifact is followed by a conclusion that draws the research threads of the exegesis and novel together, cementing and capping the work of the thesis through demonstrating the utility of model for scholars and creative writers.

Wherever You Are

by Rachel Robinson

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Chapter One

If this was a dream, Layla Cross thought as she surveyed the Massachusetts village sprawled before her, she didn't want to wake up. Soon the entire, abandoned settlement of Applestead would be hers.

"Oh, Zeb, it's perfect," she said, glancing at her foster dog in the rear-view mirror. "Just look at it."

From his spot in the middle of the back seat, the old border collie obligingly peered through the windshield to the little town nestled in the valley, but he didn't seem impressed. He turned back to her, his black and white head cocked to the side.

Layla cracked a window, letting the scents of balsam fir and clean air drift through the stationary SUV. "It might mean nothing to you now, Zebadiah, but soon that smell will mean home. For the whole motley group of us."

The town was empty, sure, but she'd make a sanctuary right here for all the dogs in her senior's rescue charity, and a bunch of senior people too. A place where she could start fresh, where no one had heard of her or her family.

She eased off the brake and let the car crawl forward along the dirt road, taking in as much as she could see, turning from side to side, not wanting to miss a thing. The green hill they'd crested sloped gently down to the town, and as they drew closer, she could make out the individual buildings that clustered together along three main roads. The adorable cabins, rustic but cheerful. The grand trees whose canopy shaded a park across the road from the main strip of buildings. The green grass strewn with leaves and the man who… Her heart missed a beat as her mind registered what she'd just seen. A man. In an abandoned town?

She pushed down on the brake again and brought the car to a stop. Yes, a dark-haired man was standing at the edge of the park, a hand raised to shade his eyes as he watched her.

"Right, Zeb," she said. "It seems this isn't a ghost town after all. There's a population of one."

The border collie had also spotted the man. Zeb's gaze zeroed in; his fuzzy ears swiveled to the front. They were the equivalent of two blocks from the man—if this place had had two blocks—and there was no one else for miles. Given they were alone in an abandoned town, he was a little too tall and a little too sturdy for her comfort.

A flash of movement from the right caught her attention and she watched as a spotty dog ran through the dappled shade of the park to the man. He leaned to ruffle the dog's neck and Zeb let out a little whine from the back seat.

She wasn't naïve enough to think bad people couldn't be loved by their dogs, but this was a little comforting. Only a little.

Zeb let out another whine and moved his weight from one foot to the other.

"I'll tell you what," she said. "We'll go a bit closer, but I get one bad vibe from him and we're out of here, whether you want to meet that dog or not."

Zeb snorted a breath through his nose, which she took as assent, even though his attention was still firmly on the other dog.

Layla released the brake and gave the car a little gas. The man straightened, watching her again and she realized he'd been leaning on something. A rake? A large man raking leaves and petting his dog in the middle of a deserted town didn't quite make sense.

When she was about half a block away, she stopped again and wound the window right down.

"Who are you?" she called out.

He leaned the rake against the tree trunk and started toward her, but she held up a hand. "Nope, not going to happen." Any sudden movement and she was hightailing it right out of Dodge. "You can tell me from there."

He dug his hands into the back pockets of his jeans, pushing the sides of his plaid shirt back to reveal more of the white T-shirt underneath. "Fair enough," he called back. "But you'll have to tell me who you are first."

She debated holding her ground, but sustaining an argument while shouting through her window seemed awkward, so she cut to the chase. "I'm Layla Cross and I own this town." She bit down on the smile that threatened to peek out at being able to say that aloud. Of course, it wasn't quite true. The paperwork hadn't been signed—she'd wanted to see the place first, so had driven out to poke around. Plus, it wouldn't be *hers* exactly, it would belong to the senior dog rescue that she ran, and she had to make it through a six-month trial period, but it was close enough on all counts for this situation.

Rake Man, however, did not seem impressed. "Is that so?" he called out and folded his arms over his chest.

"Your turn." She tried to make it sound like an order, despite her current position not lending itself to authority.

"I'm Eddie, and this is my town." He uncrossed his arms and shrugged broad shoulders. "Well, it belongs to my family. Still, that means it can't be yours, so I'd appreciate

it if you'd turn around and head back the way you came."

Layla was pretty good at reading body language. Spending most of her time around dogs instead of people, both in her work as a vet nurse and with her rescue group, she'd learned to pay attention to the details—to rely on non-verbal cues rather than just words. And this man didn't betray a single sign that he was lying. His stance was confident and open. He held her gaze with no furtive glances away. He was alert yet had no restless ticks or movements. There were three possibilities. One—he was a very good liar. But her lie-spotting game was strong, so that was an unlikely option. Two—he really believed the lie he was selling her. A definite possibility. Or, three—he was telling the truth. Which, obviously, was impossible because Diane had dropped off the papers this morning after her lawyer had…

Diane.

Hadn't Diane said she'd occasionally used the town for family holidays?

She sized up the guy with the rake. "All right. What's your last name?"

He rested his hands low on his hips and kept his gaze steady. "Not that I need to tell you, but it's Fitzpatrick. Eddie Fitzpatrick."

The pieces of the puzzle slotted into place. Diane Fitzpatrick was the woman donating the town to become a senior dog sanctuary.

"You're Diane's son?"

"Grandson."

Layla blew out a breath and then turned to the border collie. "Looks like we might have hit a snag, Zebadiah."

Gaze still fixed on Eddie's dog, Zeb gave a half-bark and wriggled in his harness.

"Right," she said. "You want to meet the pretty dog. As long as we have our priorities straight."

*

Eddie watched the blonde in the SUV, not sure what was going on, but certain that whatever it was, it would end up being a giant pain in his ass. He sighed and gave Willow a hand signal to follow, but to stay at his heels.

The woman—Layla—opened her door and stepped out, and he realized there was a dog on the back seat. He waited while she zipped up her hoodie, then as she turned back to the car said, “I’d rather you didn’t let your dog out just yet.”

“He’s friendly,” she said, not asserting her case, just giving the facts. He appreciated that. Most people barreled on, disregarding that he was giving a warning.

“She’s not,” he said, pointing to his dalmatian Willow.

“Aggression?” Layla asked.

“Anxiety,” he said. “She’s deaf and she prefers meeting other dogs under controlled circumstances.”

She narrowed her pale green eyes as she regarded him. Then, when Willow was turned away, Layla made a loud noise. Willow didn’t react.

Eddie frowned. “You thought I was lying about my dog being deaf?” Of all the things he’d ever lied about, that one had never occurred to him.

“Bad people lie about lots of things, especially to keep a guard dog contained,” she said, her head tilting toward the border collie in her car. “Though I’m pretty sure it would be rare to find one who’d bother looking after a deaf dog.”

Willow looked up at him, wanting to know what was going on, and he waved three fingers—his sign to tell her she was a good girl, and she laid down on the grass, content.

“Whether or not I’m a bad person is a much longer conversation,” he said. “One I’m not getting into now, even if you do know my grandmother’s name. This is private property and I have a lot of work to get done.”

"Good point." She flashed him what she probably thought was a smile. Smooth enough to fool most people, but he'd grown up with masters of faking emotion, so he wasn't most people.

"Problem?" he asked mildly.

"Maybe." She glanced back at her dog, then blew out a breath. "Look, I'm probably going to put my foot in it. Though, to be honest, that's not uncommon for me." The awkward approximation of a smile came back for a fraction of a second.

What could her story be? Not enough smooth charm for a realtor. Not thinking on her feet enough for a con artist.

He rocked back on his heels. "So, you're suddenly homeless and thought an abandoned town would be a good place to stay a while?"

"What?" she asked, frowning. "No."

"A tourist, doing the Massachusetts ghost towns trail?"

She huffed out an incredulous laugh. "Who has time for something like that?"

"Okay," he said, beginning to enjoy himself. "Someone dared you to come and find out if Applestead is really haunted?"

She stilled. "Applestead is haunted?"

Those pale green eyes, the color of a clear freshwater creek, widened. Along with her cupid's bow mouth and heart-shaped face, she would have looked like a pixie, if it weren't for the nose that was a little too long and cheekbones that were a little too sharp. Instead, she looked strong. Interesting. Distinctive.

"Where would the fun be in telling you the answer now if you really have been dared?"

She darted an uncertain glance over to the buildings that made up the village. "It's not a dare."

Which left one other option, the one he'd been hoping wasn't true. "My grandmother sent you out here to check up on me."

"No, she didn't—"

"It's okay," he said, not sure if he was more annoyed or disappointed. "You can drop the cover story. She thinks I'm still not adjusting to civilian life and sent you to make sure I hadn't done anything stupid."

"No, I—"

"You've wasted a trip." He'd tried for a neutral tone, but he heard the bitterness leach into his voice. He grabbed the rake from its spot against the tree trunk and turned to leave. "Please tell my grandmother that I'm perfectly fine. Sane, even."

He gave Willow a hand signal to follow and set off across the park.

"I promise it's not that," Layla called, but he didn't believe her for a second. Lately, his father and grandmother had all been calling too often, but he couldn't reassure them the way they wanted, so he'd been letting the calls go through to voicemail then sending a text in reply. Apparently, they'd stepped up their game and sent the blonde.

"Eddie," she called again. "Diane gave me the town."

He stopped. Played the words over again in his head. Turned back to the stranger. "She *gave* you this town?"

"Yes," she said, flinching.

He took several steps back, stopping about five feet away. "Just… handed it over to you? No strings attached?"

"Oh, there are strings." The way she said those words—as if a whole pile of give and take had been factored into the equation—was what did it. Knowing how his grandmother operated, Layla's story had a possibility of being true.

He dragged a hand down his face and met her gaze again. "Then you'd better come on

over to the hotel and tell me what's going on." He waved in the building's direction. "It's the long green one. You can drive over and I'll meet you there."

"Sure," she said, but hardly seemed thrilled by the idea. Which was fine with him because that made two of them.

He signaled to Willow and headed off, ready to hear the news that his life was about to change. Again.

*

Right. Layla sucked in her bottom lip and bit down. Talk with the stranger alone. She watched him walk away, his spotty dog at his heels. Not a complete stranger. Eddie Fitzpatrick. Diane's grandson. None of which made her feel any better. He didn't know the town had been given away and his grandmother should be the one to tell him, but no point dwelling on that now. Diane would probably be furious at her for coming out without telling her and perhaps if she'd stopped to think she might have waited until the paperwork was finalized and Diane brought her out herself, but it had been so long since she'd felt excited. And… optimistic.

She glanced in the rear vision mirror and met a steady chocolate-brown gaze. "Ready, Zeb?"

His tail thumped on the seat. Zeb had been born ready.

"You're a good boy."

His eyes squinted in pleasure for a couple of seconds, then his gaze was focused back on the job ahead.

Layla drove around the park and pulled up outside the longest building with the porch. It was larger than the other buildings in the row, which were more like small cabins. The walls were a sage green that blended with the shrubs around and the charcoal trims gave it a modern edge.

She clipped Zeb's leash to his collar and he jumped through the front seat to the grass verge in two graceful leaps. Layla grabbed her bag and tried to gather all her strength and bravery together in one nice big pile.

As they walked past the neatly trimmed hedge, Layla said, "You'll need to be on your best behavior with Willow. She's easily spooked."

Zeb didn't seem fazed.

She decided to follow his example. How bad could this be…?

A small, open gate led through the hedge. Even before she stepped through and onto the paved path, she noticed Eddie looming in the doorway, hands low on his hips, gaze heavy as it tracked her approach.

"I don't have anything fancy to offer you," he said when she reached him. "There are only supplies in for Willow and me. There's coffee, but no milk. I could probably rustle up some cookies or something."

She shook her head. Not only did that not sound promising but she didn't want to use up his supplies. She wasn't sure how far the closest grocery store was—something she'd need to check on for when she lived here.

"I'm good. I have a water bottle in my bag. But if you have one, a water bowl for Zeb would be great."

He pointed to the spot where the porch turned a corner and wrapped around the side. "Willow's bowl is over there."

She led Zeb over, and while he drank, she tried to stealthily watch her host. His dark hair was ruffled and in need of a trim, and his stubble had passed the five-day growth stage but wasn't quite a beard.

"Still wondering if I'm a bad man?" He arched an eyebrow.

So. Not as stealthy as she'd hoped then.

"Maybe," she said. "Or maybe wondering who would live out here alone."

"I like the quiet and the calm. So does Willow."

Quiet and calm were two of the things she was looking forward to the most. After the drama and publicity that followed her parents' arrests, she'd been craving both. Applestead would be a sanctuary for her as well as the dogs.

Zeb finished with the water bowl, and she followed Eddie through the front door. "Where's Willow?" she asked as they passed through a lounge room with sofas and rugs.

"She's waiting down the hall until it's calm enough for her to feel safe." He paused, looking down at Zeb. "How obedient is your dog?"

In most situations, that was an easy question to answer. He was a border collie, after all, and was eager to please her and do his job well. But she had a feeling that Eddie's expectations of obedience might be higher than hers. So she shrugged and said, "I've been fostering him for a few months, but he usually does what I want. Having said that, I'm not especially strict with him."

Two deep grooves appeared across his forehead. "Do you think you can get him to sit still while Willow sniffs him?"

Her shoulders relaxed a fraction. That was doable. "He should. He's been pretty keen to meet her since he spotted her in the park, but he's good with the sit and stay commands."

Eddie nodded once—though he didn't seem completely satisfied—and marched off down the hall again.

"Best behavior, Zeb," she whispered and then followed.

They entered a large kitchen with gleaming stainless steel appliances and poured cement counters. As commercial kitchens went, it had a homey feel.

Willow was lying on the tiled floor against the main cabinets—a position that gave her a good view of the hall entrance and the security that she wouldn't be surprised from

behind. When she noticed their arrival, she leapt to her feet, but Eddie held up a hand, palm towards her, and she stayed put.

"Now would be a good time to make your dog stay," Eddie said.

"Sit, Zeb," Layla said firmly.

Zeb sat without hesitation.

"Stay," she said, then to Eddie, "He should be fine now."

Eddie glanced down at Zeb—who was now trembling with anticipation—and seemed to remain unconvinced. But he shrugged one shoulder then he turned his hand over, palm up, and waved his fingers to call Willow over. She came at once, first to Eddie, who scratched her behind the ears, then to inspect her visitors.

"Stay," Layla reminded Zeb.

Willow wandered over, her body alert but not particularly anxious. She checked with Eddie a couple of times, then sniffed the base of Zeb's tail where it met with the floor—the closest she could get to sniffing his butt while he was sitting. Zeb practically vibrated with the effort it took to stay still, throwing beseeching looks at Layla.

Seemingly satisfied, Willow trotted back to Eddie. Layla let out a long breath, feeling like she and Zeb had passed a test. Sure, she wanted Eddie's respect before she lumped the full story of the town's future on him, but more than that, she wanted Zeb's meeting with Eddie's dog to go well for Willow's own sake. Since she'd been a kid, dogs had always been the priority in any given situation. Dogs had never let her down.

Eddie ruffled Willow's head and she beamed a dalmatian smile up at him. Zeb let out a little whine.

Phase one of the introductions had worked, but things were far from settled. In her time working with foster dogs, she'd seen some bad introductions, where people expected too much of their dogs. Without the ability to explain the situation to their dogs, some people just

threw the dogs together and crossed their fingers, often leading to disastrous consequences.

"Is there a backyard through there where we could walk them?" she asked. Having the dogs do something together was her favorite method of integration.

"Sure, there's a patch of grass," Eddie said and reached for the door. He headed out, Willow by his side and Layla called to Zeb to follow. Sure enough, he raced to Willow, gave her a quick sniff, but the call of a new yard was more than he could bear and he raced away to smell the base of a shrub. Willow watched him for a few seconds, then trotted after him. Before long, they were exploring like a team.

Beside her, Eddie cleared his throat. "Maybe it's time you tell me what you're doing here."

Her heart sank. For a few minutes she'd been swept up in the joy of the dogs, but she was here for a reason, and it was time to get down to business.

*

Eddie frowned as Layla dug her hands into her pockets and looked down at the ground. This wasn't going to be good, clearly, but dragging it out would only make it worse. "Just spill it."

"I'm going to convert the town into a senior dog sanctuary."

Eddie straightened. That might not have been the absolute last thing he'd expected, but it had to be close. Only one word formed in his brain. "Why?"

"I already run a senior dog rescue in Boston, but we're dependent on volunteer foster carers who'll open their homes to the dogs and on the time I can squeeze in around my work as a vet nurse. I asked your grandmother for a donation to help with costs and she countered by offering Applestead. It seemed too good to be true, but luckily she is as good as her word. So—" she shrugged awkwardly "—I'll be moving out here with some volunteer carers and a group of dogs."

Eddie stared for a full three seconds, horrified. Then slowly, keeping his gaze on

Layla, he took his cell from his pocket and dialed his grandmother. “Tell me it’s not true.”

“Eddie,” she said, cheerfully. “How delightful to hear from you. I’d assumed you’d lost my number.”

He ran his free hand through his hair. “Gran.”

“Yes, my darling?”

“You gave our town to a bunch of dogs?”

There was a pause. “How did you find out?”

No denying it then. He glanced at Layla and let out a long breath. His grandmother had lost her mind.

“Layla dropped by for a look around.” The woman herself looked away, her blonde hair swinging.

“Ah.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You weren’t answering my calls, Edward. What was I supposed to do? Hire a skywriting plane?”

“I don’t get it. You set this place up to be a family retreat.”

“And now I’m setting it up as a dog sanctuary. Eddie, this is my retirement plan and my legacy. Once I step down from the company, I’ll be moving there too. In the meantime, nothing needs to change.”

“Family holidays?”

“They can still visit.” She paused. “Well, those who still want to engage with the family can.”

“What about me?”

“It’s perfect for you. You still have your job. You love dogs and now you’ll have company—you know how good that will be for you after what happened.”

Eddie speared his fingers through his hair. Between his family and the army he was pretty much peopled-out these days.

“You won’t need me here anymore. I’ll leave when they all move in.”

“Eddie—”

“Gotta go,” he said and hung up.

He glanced over at Layla, who was trying hard to pretend she wasn’t listening, one half of her plump bottom lip caught between her teeth.

“Your story checks out.”

She tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. “Was she angry I came out without letting her know?”

“I don’t think it registered. She was more concerned about convincing me to stay.” He blew out a breath. “She thinks the company will be good for me.”

“I’m gathering you’re not a fan of company.”

He coughed out a laugh at the understatement. Groups of people were his idea of hell. Besides, no one deserved his company. “Only Willow. So when you move in, I’ll get out of your hair.”

“Eddie,” she said, her brows drawing together in a frown. “I had no idea that we’d be putting you out of a home and a job.”

“It was only temporary. A soft place to land.” Before she could ask him anything else, he turned.

“It was good to meet you, Layla. I hope your dream works out for you.”

He signaled to Willow and headed for his cabin. He needed the quiet to plan his new future.

Chapter Two

When Layla and three foster dogs pulled up at Applestead's hotel on moving day just over two weeks later, her SUV stuffed with things she hadn't wanted to send in the moving truck, Eddie was on the verge, as if waiting for her, arms crossed over his chest. And scowling.

Six foot of muscles and attitude packaged in a lumberjack-style plaid shirt and jeans was not normally her type, but the sight of him made her skin hot, which was the last thing she needed right now, so she scowled right back.

Diane had given her six months to prove she could make this sanctuary work and become self-sustaining, so it was crucial that everything was above board, all lines were clear, and every move she made was transparent. Even if no one connected to Applestead knew about the cloud that hung over her family, she still had to be more careful than other people. Ever since her parents had been arrested, her life had been a tinder pile waiting for a spark. And there could be no doubt that Eddie Fitzpatrick's deep blue, dark-lashed eyes were made for starting fires.

In the meantime, however, she needed his help.

She swallowed hard and looked over her shoulder at Zeb and her two other foster dogs, Tinkerbell and J.R. “Right, one of you needs to charm the cranky human. Any volunteers?”

The black Labrador lifted her large head, sniffed the air, and then stretched out and closed her eyes again. “Right. I guess that’s you out, Tink. Thanks for considering it.”

Little terrier cross J.R. stood up on his back legs like a meerkat, bouncing to get more height so he could see out the windshield. “You sure?” Layla asked, trying not to laugh. His impossibly big ears swiveled from her to the windshield again and his crooked tail wagged hard.

“You’ve got the job,” she said as she pushed the open packet of roasted almonds out the way and clicked his leash onto his harness. J.R. whined his eagerness for whatever adventure awaited.

She poked her head out the window and called out, “Is Willow with you?”

“She’s inside.” His voice was deep and gravel-rough and had as much effect on her as seeing him had. Maybe more. But she brushed that aside—*remember, tinder piles and sparks*—and held the ten pounds of squirming little dog aloft.

“Would you mind taking J.R. while I get the leashes on Zeb and Tinkerbell?”

Eddie closed the distance and took the scruffy bundle through the window. He held him against his chest for a moment but J.R. wriggled so he put him down on the grass. J.R. headed straight for a shrub and cocked his leg. It had been a long trip.

She clicked leashes on Tink and Zeb and let them out to pee and sniff around, keeping Eddie in her peripheral vision. He stood with J.R.’s leash looped around one wrist, his other hand deep in the pocket of his jeans. And he was still scowling.

She was going to have to fire J.R. from the cranky-human-charmer position—the terrier was far too interested in exploring the area he was already claiming as his new

territory to do the job justice.

But someone needed to do it.

She had two weeks to get set up before the others arrived and she needed Eddie. He knew the town and where to find supplies and contractors in neighboring towns. Sure, he'd promised his grandmother he'd help during the transition, but there was a huge difference between doing-the-bare-minimum-because-you'd-promised-your-grandmother and the throwing-yourself-into-it version of help, and she definitely needed the latter.

And now J.R. had abdicated his responsibility. She should have handed over sweet Tinkerbell. Never send a terrier to do a Labrador's job.

She'd have to charm the cranky man herself. She drew a deep breath of clear, country air. Not a problem.

Conjuring up the most genuine of her fake smiles, Layla asked brightly, "How's your day been?"

"Busy." The word was flat and heavy.

Busy? She glanced down the empty street and across to the deserted park. How busy could it get in a town with a population of one human and one dog?

"Dealing with the tourist hoards?" she asked, belatedly remembering she was supposed to be a charmer, not a smart ass.

"Dealing with the movers leaving all your furniture here."

Her stomach dropped. "You're kidding me," she said, but knew he wasn't. She checked her watch—11.09am—and swore. "I am so sorry, Eddie. I double checked that they wouldn't deliver before midday."

"Didn't you leave your place at the same time?"

"We packed up the house yesterday afternoon, and I slept on a blow-up mattress last night. They were worried about the time it would take for the drive out here and back, on top

of the house pack up." Which probably should have been a red flag that they might want to drop off early.

Tinkerbell, clearly bored of all the standing around and chatting, threw her generously padded Labrador frame down on the ground, then twisted side to side, rubbing her back all over the grass. Eddie glanced over but seemed unmoved. So both J.R. and Tink had struck out, and Zeb was sniffing the wind, probably looking for Willow. Which, again, left her on charmer duty. She could do this. She could be charming if she chose to, damn it.

"Eddie, I'm sorry that both times we've met there's been something unexpected—the news that Diane gave away the town, and now my furniture arriving without me. And you seem like a man who doesn't like surprises."

"Can't say I'm fond of them." His scowl lessened a little.

"I'd like to apologize. And maybe ask if we can start over."

He scrubbed his free hand over his chin, scraping the week-old growth of dark beard. "Okay. Fine. Besides, neither surprise was strictly your fault. My grandmother should have already told me about the town, and the movers ignored your directions."

"So, we're good?" she asked, hopeful.

He shrugged broad shoulders. "Sure. We're good."

She'd managed to salvage something, but she needed more from him. "How about we start over?" She stuck out her hand and he reluctantly shook it once. "Hi, I'm Layla. Nice to meet you. Since we'll be the only two people in town for a couple of weeks, it's probably fair to warn you that I've been told I'm stubborn, have an annoying habit of singing to myself, and don't play well with others."

One corner of his mouth tugged. "Any of it true?"

"Unfortunately, all of it is. Though, full disclosure, I don't sing to myself—I sing to the dogs."

"Noted." He crouched down to ruffle J.R.'s bat-like ears. "So that's how other people describe you. How would you describe yourself?"

She thought for a moment as she watched J.R. practically melt from the attention. "I'm no quitter, and I mostly prefer the company of dogs to people."

He considered that a moment, then nodded once. "Nice to meet you, Layla."

"Your turn."

"Nope, I'm good," he said and turned away.

"Oh, come on, fair's fair. I revealed my darkest secrets. Things only J.R. knew."

"Your closest confidant is a dog you've fostered for what? A few months?"

"Oh, he and Tinkerbell have been with another foster carer, Julie. She isn't moving out here with us, so I picked them up this morning on the way out."

"On the drive out here you told a complete stranger your darkest secrets?"

"It was an intense trip. Tinkerbell overheard and confessed her lifelong fear of beetles. Things got real."

He glanced pointedly at Tinkerbell where she lay dozing, her jet-black coat gleaming in the sun, eyes closed in her gray face, not a care in the world.

"Tink has layers," she said. "Besides, it wasn't the first time I'd met J.R. All the dogs come to me first for intake and assessment before going out to a carer." She paused then smiled. "I believe it's still your turn."

He looked up at the sky, then wrapped a hand around the back of his neck. "Okay, sure. I'm Eddie," he said, his neutral expression showing how good his self-discipline was. "People tell me that I'm too regimented, I keep people at an arm's length, and I'm annoyingly good looking."

He raised an eyebrow, challenging.

"Exactly how many have said the last one?" she asked sweetly.

His lips twitched. “I can tell they think it.”

His dark blue eyes danced, inviting her to join the joke and she had to admit, even if only to herself, that ‘they’ were right. He was annoyingly good looking. But he was also a guy who’d be leaving in a week or two, and who was off limits. So she pushed the awareness aside, and said, “And how would you describe yourself?”

“I like to keep busy, I prefer order to chaos, and—” he met her gaze squarely “—I always prefer the company of dogs to people.”

She chuckled. “Right. Good. I think we’ll be fine as long as I remember you prefer J.R. to me.”

“And Zeb.”

“You prefer J.R. and Zeb to me.”

“And Tinkerbell.” He looked down at the Lab, who had returned to rubbing her back over the grass with unbridled enthusiasm.

“Got it. So long as I remember you prefer J.R., Zeb, and Tink to me. And you remember I prefer Willow.”

“Sounds like a solid foundation.”

His face finally broke into a proper smile and it was as if the sun crept up over the horizon and everything around was suddenly brighter. Something shifted inside her chest, and without thinking, Layla smiled back.

*

Eddie spent the next two hours helping Layla sort through her stuff to find the clothes, pantry items and the few pieces of furniture she’d have in her cabin. He’d had the movers leave it all in the old schoolhouse, on the other side of the park from the cabins, so they had plenty of space to see what was what. When his family would gather at Applestead for Christmas and other holidays, they’d mainly get together in the hotel’s function rooms and the cabins, so the

two-story, wooden schoolhouse was practically empty, which was a shame—it had huge rooms and overlooked the pond so had the best view in town. When the weather kept him and Willow inside, they often took coffee breaks in the schoolhouse's long room and watch the sunlight move across the water.

He stretched and looked around at Layla's furniture and boxes. They'd made good progress, so now she just needed to choose a cabin so they could move the stuff across.

With Zeb's leash in one hand and Layla following with J.R. and Tinkerbell, Eddie headed across the park to the strip of cabins, the leaves of the big trees rustling high above them. He'd left Willow at his place for the morning because they hadn't had the chance for the gentle introductions she'd need with the two new dogs.

They stood on the road, the two humans surveying Layla's options for her new home, and the three dogs sitting, probably hoping there would be treats in their near future. Each cabin was different—some were cute, others plain; some small and others larger; some with shrubs in the yard, others with just grass. After spending his vacations here as a kid, he knew each one like the back of his hand.

Layla was quiet as she looked from one place to the next, raising a hand to shade her eyes as she squinted at a chimney or a front door. Her blonde hair was in a high ponytail that bobbed every time she moved, her bottom lip pink and rosy every time she sucked it into her mouth and chewed on it.

He rocked back on his heels. "You're hoping I'm going to say there's a secret extra cabin away from all the others, aren't you?"

"No," she said, tugging on the corner of her denim jacket. "It's probably better I'm near all the dogs in case problems arise."

This morning she'd given him a glimpse of her real self, so she couldn't brush him off now with a fake response. He raised one eyebrow and waited.

She caught him watching her and sighed. “Okay, yes, I’d love a place that’s less… peopley. But I know these eight cabins are the only ones that are ready to be lived in. Right…?”

“These are the ones my family use when they stay, so they’re the only places we’ve kept in good shape. There are some others scattered around that are close to livable, but they’re not ready.” He’d planned on working on the others when he had spare time and get two or three into better shape. As his cousins married and had kids, they’d want to start spreading out, and Jonathon would love—

He caught the thought before it was complete and winced. His cousins, aunts, uncles and parents weren’t coming to stay on vacation. Applestead wasn’t his family’s retreat anymore. One more place he’d thought of as home, one more place he’d have to walk away from. Only this time worse because Jonathon would never experience it as home. Despite losing his bid for custody of his four-year-old nephew, he’d still had dreams of bringing the boy out here on vacations and the occasional weekend.

Eddie swallowed hard and dug his hands deep into his pockets. These thoughts wouldn’t help him get through this current situation, so best to stash them away at the back of his mind, along with all the other thoughts and memories that shouldn’t see the light of day.

“Which one is yours?” Layla asked.

“The white one at the end.” He glanced down at the place that had been his home—No, at the place where he’d been staying for the past two years. He’d recently repainted it cream with chestnut trims, and it had turned out pretty well.

Layla pointed to the cabin closest to the hotel, the one his grandmother always used. “I’m guessing that’s Diane’s. She said hers was butterscotch yellow with a white fence.”

“It’s also the largest,” he said, leaning down to stroke Zeb’s ears. Choosing the largest was very much his grandmother’s style. She liked the biggest and the best and she loved to be

in charge. And he had a feeling she wasn't going to hand over the reins of the town easily, no matter her intentions now. He wondered if Layla knew that.

"I have no idea how to choose," she said and blew out a long breath. "Which one do you think I should take?"

He shrugged. "Depends on your needs and your tastes."

"Such as?"

He pointed to the second cabin. "My Aunt Michelle had bright orange and yellow wallpaper put through that one."

Her eyebrows shot up. "She got it on sale?"

"Nope. Said it makes her happy." He smiled at the thought of his favorite aunt. "And that one—" he pointed to the place beside it "—is the smallest. One bedroom, one room for living and dining, a bathroom and a kitchen."

Her smile didn't seem enthusiastic, but she didn't rule it out. "Tell me about the others."

"Come on, Zeb," he said. Zeb was immediately ready for whatever was on offer. They walked a couple of doors down to stand in front of the fourth cabin. Layla followed with J.R. and Tinkerbell, her blonde ponytail bobbing as she walked.

"With this one, the house is nothing special, but it has the best backyard." It had been his parents' cabin—holidays as he was growing up were in this place. He smiled at the memory. "There's a couple of big old apple trees and a swing hanging from one of them." In his mind, he could see Jonathon on that swing.

Her eyes lit up. "So far this one's my favorite."

His too, but he couldn't afford to be sentimental. It was just a house—one he'd probably never see again after he left in a couple of weeks.

They walked to the next one and stood in front of its knee-high border wall made

from local stone. “I recently repainted the interior of this place and laid new carpet, so it’s in pretty good shape.”

“This wall isn’t very high, but it will keep in the SWFs that are moving out with us.”

He ran the acronym though his mental databases but came up blank. “SWFs?”

“Small white fluffies. We always seem to have a few of them in foster.”

“Noted. Best save it for them.”

They moved along again, with J.R. making sure to pee on as many things as possible. Eddie was about to give some notes on the sixth cabin, but Zeb suddenly caught a whiff of something farther down the street and jerked on the leash. Eddie was caught by surprise, but still had a good grip.

“Zeb,” Layla said sternly. “Manners.”

Zeb plopped his butt on the ground, but still whined. His nose pointed directly at Eddie’s place.

Eddie rested a hand on Zeb’s head. “He can probably smell Willow.” Maybe they should have let Zeb see Willow earlier, but they’d had so much to get done. He turned back to the sixth cabin but Zeb’s faint, sad whining was distracting. He glanced down. “Dude, that’s a bit pathetic.”

Zeb didn’t seem to care. All his attention was on the door, two houses down.

“I’m sorry,” Layla said. “Do you want me to take him?”

The old border collie swung his head around and made eye contact with Eddie, a question in his eyes. Eddie sighed. He had a feeling he was being played, but he couldn’t say no. Besides, Willow was probably bored and lonely after spending a morning on her own.

He turned back to Layla. “How about I duck home with Zeb and let him see Willow? We can do the introductions with J.R. and Tinkerbell later.”

“Are you sure? You don’t want me there for that?”

"We'll be fine. They've met before. Might be better to get the reunion out of the way before the new introductions happen anyway."

"Okay, great. These two would love a chance to explore, and if I wear them out enough they'll sleep all afternoon while we move my stuff over."

"It's a plan."

*

Layla watched Eddie walk off with Zeb, then glanced down at J.R and Tinkerbell. Tink was pacing as far as her leash would allow, her tongue lolling out of her graying snout, clearly keen to get out and see the sights. J.R. sat still, sniffing the air, trying to ascertain if there were any predators lurking nearby.

"J.R.?" she said. "Want to go for a walk?"

J.R was immediately on all four feet, wagging. Of course, it was practically a rhetorical question.

They set off along the road. One advantage of an empty town was not having to worry about traffic. The pace was slow because the dogs were stopping every third step to smell something and each dog was smelling different things, their leashes tangling as they wove from one side to the other. Layla didn't mind. Seeing them excited and happy in their new home made her heart glow.

Once they were halfway across the park, she took out her cell and dialed Diane. She'd promised to call when she'd arrived at Applestead. Another woman answered the call, but Diane quickly came on the line.

"Layla! Darling! How's it going there?"

"Well, mostly good, with just a couple of not-quite-to-plan things."

"What things?" Diane said without missing a beat.

"The movers came early so by the time I arrived they'd unloaded all the furniture and

left."

"How inconvenient."

"I'm thinking of putting my furniture in the schoolhouse and setting up an office there. Is that okay?"

"Layla," Diane said, her voice suddenly stern. "We've talked about this. For the trial period, you're in charge. Tell me you don't already have a list, either on paper or in your head, of what will go where."

Layla smiled. "Okay, you got me."

"More importantly, tell me how Eddie is."

The dogs sniffed the base of a huge oak and Layla looked up at the blue sky through its canopy of leaves. "He seems to be coping with us here, even if the furniture's early morning arrival annoyed him."

"That's good, but how *is* he? In himself."

Something in Diane's tone set off alarm bells and Layla ran through everything Eddie had said and done. Only one thing stood out—on the day she'd first met him, Eddie had assumed she was here to spy on him for his family.

"She thinks I'm still not adjusting and sent you to make sure I hadn't done anything stupid," he'd said. Then, *"Please tell my grandmother that I'm perfectly fine. Sane, even."*

"Diane, is everything okay with Eddie?" She glanced back to his cabin. "Should I be worried?"

"About your safety? Absolutely not. He's just been avoiding my calls since…he's been out of the army."

Layla bent to untangle the leash from Tinkerbell's leg. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing of consequence. However, since you're there, if you notice anything strange, call me."

Anything strange? “Seriously, Diane, what’s his deal?”

“When the time came for Eddie to reenlist in the army a while ago, he turned his back on his career, and since he’s been home he’s been avoiding my calls and those from his father. So I need you to promise something, Layla. While you’re there together, can you keep an eye on Eddie? Let me know if I should rush out?”

She glanced back at the cabins. Something about this wasn’t adding up. “Just because he changed jobs?”

“Yes. Well… no.” There was a pause, then the sound of a long breath being expelled. “Just before he walked away from the army, his brother died. We were all blindsided by Tom’s death, but Eddie most of all. I’d be so reassured if I knew he had someone by his side, keeping an eye on him.”

“He seems okay, but if he’s grieving…” Layla’s heart clenched. *He lost his brother?* Being an only child, she’d built up fantasies of having a sister or a brother, someone always there for you, to share things with, to have your back. She couldn’t even fathom having that and then losing it.

“You’ll keep an eye on him for me?”

Layla leaned back against the trunk of a huge tree as the dogs sniffed the base. Feeling sorry for the man was one thing, getting involved was another thing entirely. She barely knew him, and he didn’t seem like the sort of person who’d appreciate her nose in his business. But what else could she say? Until the six-month trial was over, Diane owned Applestead. Layla’s entire plan was in this woman’s hands. “Okay, sure. I guess.”

“Thank you,” Diane said. “I have to run—I’m in the middle of something.”

Layla disconnected, shoved the cell in the back pocket of her jeans and let out a groan. J.R. looked up, his huge ears rotating toward her to catch the noise, crooked tail pointing up at attention.

"It's okay, little boy," she said as she crouched down to reassure him. "We're fine, you're fine, everything's fine. A little more complicated than I'd hoped, but fine. I promise."

Tinkerbell ambled over and, happy to find a human at her height, licked Layla's cheek. "Thanks, Tink." She wrapped an arm around the Labrador and sighed.

All she had to do now was get Applestead ready for the new residents in two weeks, set the sanctuary up to be self-sufficient before the trial was up, keep her real identity under wraps, and watch over a possibly troubled lumberjack-man. Easy.

She hugged Tink harder and tried to convince herself that she could do this.

*

Rhonda Quinney watched discreetly as Diane ended a call from the woman who'd taken over Applestead. From her spot on the plush sofa in the private, mirrored room of a high-end Boston fashion store, she'd listened to Diane's side of the conversation, her stomach sinking. It seemed the plan to convert the town into a sanctuary for elderly dogs was actually going ahead.

"The sooner you move out there the better," Diane said as she dropped her cell into her purse.

Rhonda shifted in her seat. "How are you going with those outfits? Don't forget you have a meeting in thirty-five minutes."

"Just a couple left to try," Diane said as she headed back to the change room. Then she popped her face back through the curtains. "Are you sure you won't try something on? My treat."

Rhonda gave a quick shake of her head. It was Diane's money to spend how she saw fit, but it was senseless to buy clothes when you already owned enough for your needs, and Rhonda wanted no part of wastefulness.

Besides, where would they wear these new clothes when they were in a backwater town?

Rhonda hated Applestead. When she'd been Diane's housekeeper, she'd accompany the family out there at least once a year. Diane would tell her to take the time off and enjoy herself. Despite Diane's good qualities, she could be oblivious. How, exactly, was Rhonda to enjoy herself? What was she to do in a place where the only other people were Diane's relatives? Inevitably, Rhonda would lurk at the edges—invited guest but never quite part of the group.

And now she and Diane would be living there for the foreseeable future. Perhaps forever.

Diane would move out when she retired and stepped down from the multi-national packaged food company she'd started when she was twenty-four, and in the meantime was sending Rhonda as an advance guard of sorts, to oversee the gradual transition of the entire household. And to keep an eye on the apple of Diane's eye, Eddie.

"What do you think of this one?" Diane asked as she stepped out in a white pantsuit with a gold scarf draped across her shoulders.

"Elegant," Rhonda said because she knew that was the expected response, even though Diane had two just like it in her closet.

"Yes, I think it might do," Diane murmured, and disappeared into the change room again.

When Diane had explained her plan three weeks ago, Rhonda had been stunned. Then she'd decided she needed an alternative plan. But what? She'd lived onsite in Diane's house when she was housekeeper, and then stayed on after retirement. At the time, the arrangement had been convenient, but it had led to a gaping hole where a social life should have been—her daily life was absorbed by the whirlwind that was Diane.

The first call was to her sister in New Jersey, suggesting they might get a place together. Her sister had been apologetic, explaining that she'd been living with her new partner for six months. Surprised, Rhonda had wished them well and then researched rental prices in Boston. She could afford something little for a while, but it would eat away her savings in no time.

"How about this?" Diane erupted from the change room in a dove gray dress covered in beading and intricately embroidered flowers. "Isn't it exquisite?"

"Well, sure," Rhonda said, pulling the edges of her cardigan over her chest. "But where would you wear it once you've moved to Applestead? On a stroll to the pond?"

Diane waved a hand dismissively. "It's not really that far from Boston, and I'll keep the apartment, so I have a base here." She pointed her toe and watched the fall of the skirt. "I'll probably keep the New York apartment too."

Keep the apartments? Rhonda sat up straighter and tried not to let the excitement overtake her just yet. "If you're keeping the apartments, it would make much more sense for me to stay. I can keep them ready for you. Travel between them and do some light cleaning, keep the fridge stocked."

Diane glanced up and frowned. "Absolutely not. You don't work for me anymore. Now you're retired, your only job is to relax and enjoy yourself."

"I wouldn't mind." Rhonda stood, meeting Diane's gaze. "In fact, I'd honestly prefer it."

Diane gave her a quick hug. "I know you would, darling. But it wouldn't be good for you at all. You'd be completely alone and we both know you need people around you."

It was a discussion they'd had many times over the years—Diane believed that if she stopped involving her in things, Rhonda would close in on herself until she became a

complete hermit. Which was probably true. Their disagreement was over whether that was a bad thing or not. Rhonda was never quite sure…

"Diane," she said, standing up, "you need someone in the apartments, keeping them in working order."

"They're just places with four walls and some overpriced carpet," Diane said, her tone stern. "You, my darling, are infinitely more important."

It was a stalemate they often arrived at—there was no doubt that Diane really did care and thought she was doing the right thing. But being on the receiving end of Diane's version of caring sometimes felt like being run over by a steam train.

Still, she was the only family Rhonda had. The only person she loved, the only person who loved her, and that meant a lot. If only it could mean a lot from here in Boston.

"How about we just delay the move then? Wait and see how the dog rescuer goes before we rearrange our lives?" If the dog rescuer's plan failed before they moved out, they could continue with their normal lives, uninterrupted.

"We'll have a great time out at Applestead, just like we always do." Diane flashed her a smile then turned to look at the dress from multiple angles in the mirrors. "You know, I like this. I'll take it."

Rhonda sank back down into the velvet sofa. It seemed she was moving to Applestead.

Chapter Three

Something was different. Eddie's senses tingled as he straightened and lifted his hand from Zeb's ears. Through narrowed eyes, he watched Layla's return from her walk. Shoulders hunched, head down, focus on the ground. Where was the exuberant woman excited about a new base for her senior dog sanctuary? Even Tinkerbell and J.R. seemed different, walking closer to Layla and looking up at her every few steps.

"Everything okay?" Eddie called when she reached the grassy verge.

She missed a step and looked up. "Huh?"

"Bad news?"

After meeting his gaze for a moment too long, she glanced away. "It's all good. Uh, I was thinking that we've done enough for today. I might spend the afternoon settling myself and the dogs into the cabin. Make the beds, unpack groceries, you know."

"Sure. But you know you haven't chosen a cabin yet, right?"

"Oh. Yes. Well…" Frowning, she glanced along the strip of cabins, as if she'd forgotten. "I'll take the one with the big tree in the backyard." She reached for Zeb's leash.

“Thanks for having him. Was he any trouble?”

“Only getting him to come back outside without Willow,” he said, handing the leash over. “You’d think they were long lost friends.”

She flashed him a distracted smile and headed off. Zeb, however, took five steps and stopped.

Layla looked back. “Come on, Zeb. Let’s have a look at your new home.”

Zeb sat.

Layla blinked. “Zebadiah?”

Zeb ducked his head, ears pulled to the back, clearly not wanting to upset Layla, but then he threw a look over his shoulder at the front door where Willow’s face had last appeared.

Eddie took a step closer. “Maybe he doesn’t want to be too far from Willow.”

“Zeb, you can see Willow later. You’ll get to spend a lot of time with her while Eddie’s still here, I promise.”

Unconvinced, Zeb laid down.

Eddie watched Layla look at the sandy brown cabin with cream and black trims next door to his, and then sigh. “I guess we’ll take number seven.”

Eddie held back a chuckle at how well Zeb had played that one. “You go on in—it’s unlocked. I’ll grab the furniture you put aside and bring it over.”

“There’s no rush,” she said. “You’ll probably need a rest too. It’s been a big day.”

A big day? He’d helped the movers with a bunch of furniture, met a couple of new dogs, and stood around talking to Layla. A big day was when a platoon packed up, moved location, and set up the entire campsite before dark.

A big day was losing your brother before you could repair the rift between you.

He unclenched his jaw. “I think I’ll cope with a few extra chores.”

"You don't want to overdo it," she said, her tone serious. "Not on my account."

Yeah, something was definitely different about her now. Before the walk, and on the first day he'd met her, she'd been awkward, like her edges hadn't been smoothed properly. She hadn't always said the best thing, but she'd been real. This, however, was far from real.

"Okay, Layla," he said. "Tell me what's changed."

She brushed away a few strands of hair that had fallen from her ponytail. "What do you mean?"

"Listen, we haven't known each other long, but I thought we'd developed an understanding." He planted his hands low on his hips. "Today, you go for a walk and arrive back looking at me like I'm a live grenade that might have had the pin pulled. So, I'll ask again—what changed?"

He watched as she worried at her bottom lip, clearly at war with herself, and then she sighed. "I spoke to your grandmother."

"I imagine you do that a lot lately," he said patiently.

"This time we talked about a new topic." She flashed him an apologetic glance. "You."

His stomach sank but he kept his voice even. "What, exactly, did you discuss?"

"She just asked me to keep an eye on you."

"You. Keep an eye on me?" If he didn't understand how serious his grandmother was, the idea would be laughable. Layla was a city girl, who looked like she had a good heart but limited survival skills. Yet his grandmother wanted her to 'keep an eye' on a trained soldier?

"It wasn't anything bad," she said in a rush. "She's worried about you, is all."

"She told you about my past, didn't she?"

"A little. Virtually nothing, really." He waited, unmoving, until she winced and gave in. "She told me you lost your brother."

He turned and paced away but stopped when Zeb whined. With his back to her, he said, “It wasn’t her story to tell.”

“She’s worried about you, Eddie.”

Another thought occurred to him, and he spun back to face her. “You said on the day we met that you weren’t helping her check up on me.”

“Well, I wasn’t then,” she said, her pale green gaze steady. “She only just asked.”

That should have made him feel at least a little better, but it didn’t. Every part of this made him feel like crap. He took several deep breaths, looking for even a hint of serenity. Unfortunately, it eluded him today as much as it did every other day.

He straightened his spine and rolled his shoulders back. “Let’s get something straight between us. I’m staying here for two weeks while you set up, as a favor to my gran, and then Willow and I are out of here. I’m helping you. In return there will be no spying on me, no reporting back to her. And no treating me any differently than you did an hour ago. Are we clear?”

Her gaze didn’t waver. “Crystal.”

“All right then.” He turned to leave.

“Eddie?”

“Yes,” he said.

“I’m sorry. We all have our pasts—I understand that more than most. It’s just that she ambushed me with the information, and you have to see that I’m in a precarious spot right now. Diane said she was worried about you and asked me to keep an eye out. And your grandmother can be persuasive.”

He sighed. She was right. She’d been caught in the middle of a family disagreement, which wasn’t her fault. All the fight inside him left in a rush and he suddenly felt like he’d lost a foot in height.

He raked his fingers through his hair then let his hands drop to his sides. “How about we call a truce?”

Her eyes lit up. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” This hadn’t been her fault. He would, however, be having a serious conversation with his grandmother about boundaries. “Let’s grab your clothes and things and move them into your cabin.”

“Thank you. And I won’t report back anything to Diane that you don’t know about.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Okay,” she said, grinning. “I won’t report back anything.”

He stuck out his hand. “Truce.”

*

The next morning, as Layla sat at her dining table with three dogs dozing nearby and a steaming mug of coffee in her hands, she let out a contented sigh. She’d done it. She was actually living in the senior dog sanctuary she’d dreamed of opening. All she needed now were the dogs and their carers. Sure, there was a bit of work to be done before they could move in, but, after a quick call to her best friend Autumn to let her know she’d arrived safely, Layla had stayed up late working on the plans, and was happy with her progress.

She smoothed her hand over the pages strewn across the varnished wooden table—spreadsheets, diagrams and charts. The sanctuary was coming together, piece by piece.

Her cabin was the icing on the cake. All the cabins were cute from the outside, and she’d expected a multi-millionaire like Diane would have kept them to a certain standard, but inside, her new home was beautiful. The walls were off white, with charcoal trims around the windows and doors, and the ceiling was crafted from wood paneling, making the rooms cozy. An overstuffed, charcoal sofa dominated the open plan room, with the gleaming white stone kitchen countertops along the far wall. The elegant look was complemented by accents of

bright apple green, like the upholstered dining chairs. This was a place she could easily get used to.

She finished the last of her coffee and stood to make another—she had a lot to get done so today caffeine was her friend—when there was a knock at the door. Given that there was only one other human in town, she had a pretty good idea who was knocking, but the dogs took the possible intruder problem seriously. Zeb leapt to his feet and in a flash was beside her, playing sentinel. J.R. raced across the room, careening around a recliner, then tried to pull up but scrabbled on the polished floorboards to avoid crashing into the door, stopping right in front of it, his ginormous ears swiveling to the front. Tinkerbell didn't get up but gave one loud woof from her bed and waited.

"Thanks, team," she said as she opened the door.

Eddie took up far too much space in her doorway. His checked flannel shirt had the sleeves rolled up, exposing muscled forearms with a dusting of dark hair. For a moment, she forgot to breathe.

"Morning," he said to her, but she knew it was probably to the dogs too.

"Good morning," she said, turning and heading back into the room. "Coffee?"

"No thanks, I'm not staying."

J.R., ever the opportunist, leapt, throwing himself in the general direction of Eddie's arms, forcing Eddie to catch him mid-air to avoid the little dog injuring himself on the crash land.

She could apologize for J.R. but as Eddie was already scratching behind his ears, she let it go. "Do you mind if I make a coffee while we talk?"

"Go right ahead." His voice was deep and rumbling and set goosebumps racing across her skin.

She crossed the room to the compact but chef-worthy kitchen, with its large,

farmhouse sink and sparkling appliances, and flicked on the jug. A kitchen like this might even tempt her to start cooking.

"Did you find everything okay last night?" Eddie asked.

She spooned coffee grounds into her French press and added the hot water as the jug clicked off. "It was pretty straightforward. I followed the list on the fridge to find the bed linen and turn the heating on."

"The lists are pretty comprehensive," he said, crouching to rub Tinkerbell's belly. "My Aunt Michelle had them made for when we brought friends out. A first-timer's cheat sheet to staying in Applestead."

Layla carried the French press and her empty mug back to the table. "You'll have to thank your aunt for me."

"You'll see her before I will." He glanced up from a blissed-out Tinkerbell, and noticing her confusion, he added, "My family will probably drop in here at some stage to see what you've done with the town, or to visit my grandmother after she moves in."

Layla put her mug on the corner of the town map she'd drawn to hold it flat. She hadn't considered that Diane's family might inspect her work or keep tabs on the changes. Still, she couldn't let that derail her, so she shrugged it off.

"What makes you think you won't see your aunt before they make it out here?"

"It's no secret that after your people have moved in, I'll be taking off."

Her stomach hollowed out. It was her fault that he had to move, that his family's holiday retreat was being transformed into a senior dog sanctuary, and the guilt of that niggled at her conscience. "Do you know where you'll go?"

"I have some feelers out. Parks need rangers; lighthouses need keepers." He stood and stretched, and then glanced over at the dining table and the mess of pages. "Planning?"

"Drowning in it. I have a looming deadline with the dogs and carers arriving in two

weeks. Actually," she said, joining him at the side of the table, "I'd love some quick advice."

"Shoot."

"There are a few chores I need to get underway, so I was going to drive over to Larch Valley and grab some materials and find a contractor for the things I can't do. Any recommendations for which town and the name of a reliable contractor?"

He ran his finger down one of the lists she'd made. "What do you need done?"

"The number one priority is dog fencing around each cabin." The first stage of the sanctuary was for the eleven dogs she already had in foster care—with no fences, that could be a disaster. "The place a couple of doors down with the short stone wall will be fine for at least two small, white fluffies, and your grandmother's has a fence, but the others need fences in place before the dogs arrive."

He shrugged one shoulder. "I can help with that."

The offer was tempting, but he already had responsibilities here, and the sanctuary wasn't his problem. Besides, she couldn't completely dismiss Diane's warnings that he might be struggling since his brother's death. "I wouldn't impose. I'm fine to get someone in."

His brows drew together in thought, and he set his hands low on his hips. "There's a dismantled apple shed a couple of streets back. Lots of local lumber just sitting there waiting, and it'd work well for dog fences. Wouldn't take much for me to build them."

"Are you serious?" A flicker of hope leapt to life in her chest.

He met her eyes with a solid self-assurance. "If you want."

Should she? Part of her felt she shouldn't ask Eddie to help build the very sanctuary that was stealing his home… but he was offering. She sucked in her pride and smiled. "That would be awesome. Thank you. Diane included a budget in our deal, which was enough to set up and operate for six months. If we can use that timber and we provide the people power, then I'll be starting off the trial period ahead." Though the more she looked at the numbers,

the more unachievable six months to get on their feet seemed.

"Not a problem," he said. "It'd be good to see the apple shed lumber being recycled back into the town."

She pulled the latest list of jobs from under the map and circled the word fences in blue. "When do you think you'll have some time?"

"Today, if that suits you. I was just about to walk Willow, but can get started after that."

Layla bit down on a smile that was threatening to cover her face. This man was the answer to her prayers. She'd expected that by the time the other people and dogs arrived, there wouldn't be enough yards enclosed for everyone—just enough to get them started. But if Eddie began this soon, there was a good chance they'd be ready for all the first phase arrivals. "Today would be great."

"In fact, that leads me to the reason I dropped over. Willow and I would like to invite Zeb on our morning walk."

Zeb sprang to his feet, instantly at attention, and Layla tried not to laugh. "He'd love that."

Eddie's face broke into a wide grin as he watched Zeb. "Willow's been pawing at the front door since she got up. I'm pretty certain she's hoping Zeb will appear there again."

"That's sweet." Quietly, to avoid causing a riot among the dogs, she edged over to the cabinet where she'd put the leashes, and wound Zeb's into a tight ball, then she crossed to Eddie and passed it to him behind her back.

Eddie took the leash, his fingers brushing across hers in the handover. "This is feeling less like a walk and more like a 1940's spy movie. Do you need me to speak in code? How about I call you Buttercup?"

"How about you don't?" she said, crossing her arms under her breasts. "I'll distract

the other two and you sneak Zeb out. They've already been on a toileting trip, and I'll take them out again soon."

Tinkerbell had gone back to sleep, satisfied that there was no food on offer. J.R. was on the softest dog bed in the corner, watching what was happening, but his eyelids were starting to droop. Zeb, however, was at Eddie's feet, looking up at him with hero-worship.

"Roger that," Eddie said, and slipped the leash clasp onto Zeb's collar without letting the metal clang as it touched metal. Then he gave Zeb a hand signal and Zeb silently followed him out the door. Eddie tipped his chin to Layla on the way out, then the door was closed and they were gone.

J.R. looked over at her, head tilted, clearly unsure if he'd just missed out on something. Tink snored softly. Layla went to make another pot of coffee, because apparently her day was going to be more eventful than she'd planned.

*

Just before midday, Eddie pulled up in the tractor out front of Layla's place with a trailer-load of lumber.

When he'd dropped Zeb home, they'd introduced Willow to J.R. and Tinkerbell. Things had gone more smoothly than he'd expected, thanks mainly to Zeb sitting at Willow's side, glaring at the other two as they approached. It appeared Zeb had appointed himself Willow's protector. Eddie was torn between being touched at their bond and feeling concern. He and Willow would be leaving soon, and attachments just made leaving harder. Leaving was a lesson hard learned when his mother had moved him at eleven years old to the other side of the country, away from his father, his grandmother, and almost everyone he knew. Willow, God love her, had an open heart despite being let down in the past, and he was worried she'd be as heartbroken when they left as he'd been at eleven.

Layla's front door swung open and she appeared with all four dogs, three of them on

leashes. Willow was sticking close to Zeb despite being free.

"Managing the dogs will be easier once the first fence is up," Layla said, "but for now I'll tie them to the pillar while I help you."

He raised a hand. "I'll be fine on my own. I had some quick set cement in the shed for the posts and it's not a big yard."

"Are you sure?" she asked, looking from the trailer back to him.

"Positive." He jumped down from the driver's seat. "You stay with the dogs." A second pair of hands would be useful, but it wasn't a difficult job.

Within a few hours, he had the posts in and stood surveying his work, happy with his progress. The frames should be done by the afternoon and if he didn't hit any snags, he could nail the palings on tomorrow. He wanted the dogs to have the freedom to go outside when they wanted, but he was aware that he wanted to help Layla too. To take care of one item on her list. Applestead becoming a senior dog sanctuary might be the reason he was suddenly homeless again, and wouldn't be able to bring his nephew here, but he had nothing but admiration for Layla jumping in with both feet to make it a reality.

Movement in his peripheral vision caught his attention, and he looked up to see Layla had slipped out her front door.

"Pretty slick move. Did you get past the dogs unnoticed?"

"Zeb saw, but he didn't mind because he's with Willow."

Eddie had another twinge of discomfort. The deeper Willow got, the harder it would be when they left, but he wouldn't deny her the friendship she was developing with Zeb while it lasted.

"How about a break?" Layla said. "I don't have anything fancy, but I do have some store-bought cookies that I just found in my food box."

"I won't ever say no to cookies."

She ducked back inside, and he brushed off his hands, and headed for a faucet on the side of the house. Layla reappeared after a few minutes with the dogs, and he watched as he washed his hands. Her hips swayed in the denim cut-offs, and a faded T-shirt pulled and tightened around her curves as she found three shaded places to tie a leash. Something about her movements, certain yet considered at the same time, made it difficult to draw his gaze away. He rolled his eyes at himself. He was as bad as Willow, with her short-lived friendship with Zeb. Even if he was sticking around after Layla's residents arrived, he was in no fit state to be indulging a fascination for a woman. With his screwed-up head he'd end up hurting anyone who got close, no matter how much he might not want that to happen. And the very worst person to be near him was someone with a delicate heart like Layla. Her love for these mutts and her dream of saving old dogs was pretty much a flashing red sign, warning him to stay away, that she was too good, too easily hurt.

Layla brought out a dog bed for each spot, talking to the four dogs individually as she worked. Tinkerbell thought it was a delightful idea and immediately curled up on hers. J.R. laid down but appeared to be plotting his escape. Zeb sat on his bed because Layla told him to, and Willow stood beside him, not trying to hide her adoration in the slightest. Yeah, he and Willow needed to be a bit more guarded around the magnetic pull of Layla and Zeb.

"I'll just grab the snacks," Layla said then disappeared again. By the time she came back, he was cleaned up, so they sat with the dogs who watched the cookies hopefully.

"I've been wondering," she said as she passed the cookies and a glass of lemonade. "How did you end up with Willow? Did you have her before you deployed or adopt her after you came home?"

He looked over at Willow and smiled at her. Willow gave him her dalmatian smile back and came over to sit on his lap. She practically knocked him over, but he didn't mind. "Not long after I arrived back, I was travelling around with no real direction in mind and I

pulled over at a truck stop. As I got out, I saw a family walk away from a picnic table with Willow still tied to the frame."

"People never cease to surprise me," Layla said and reached over to stroke Tinkerbell's ears.

"At first I thought it was a mistake so I called out. The guy tried to ignore me, then when I caught up with him he told me not to worry because someone would take her. Seemed he'd paid a lot of money for a purebred dalmatian but had problems with her being stubborn and disobedient. When they worked out that she was deaf, he contacted the breeder to exchange the 'defective' dog for a new one. The breeder said 'no returns' but offered to sell them another puppy after they had Willow put to sleep. The guy didn't want to pay the fee for the vet to do it, so he figured if he left her at a busy truck stop, someone would want her. I sprinted straight over before anyone else could get to her and took her with me."

Eddie let the love he had for Willow fill his chest, and wrapped an arm around her middle.

"She's lucky you were the one who took her." Layla gave him a bittersweet smile. "Bad things happen to abandoned dogs."

"I can imagine." And he had imagined what could have happened, often, since he'd adopted her. "They'd called her Dot, but since she was deaf I figured she wouldn't care if I changed it."

"Why Willow?" she asked as she rubbed Tink's belly.

He pointed in the direction of the pond. "After a big, old willow tree on the banks of the pond over there. I loved sitting under that tree when I was a kid, skimming stones across the water, swinging on a rope my father tied to a branch, climbing as far as I could and feeling like the king of the world." That tree was the first spot he'd visited when he came back into town a year ago, and the place he'd most wanted to share with Jonathon.

"So then it was just the two of you on the open road?"

"Yep," he said. "I started teaching her some signs for commands and she lapped it up. Soon after Gran asked me to come to Applestead to keep an eye on it and do some maintenance."

He knew the offer was more about his gran being able to keep tabs on him—she'd been worried he'd do something stupid and hurt himself after the way he left the army. But he didn't mind what her intentions were. The job suited him.

"So here you are."

"For now," he said. But he didn't want to give her an opening to talk about him leaving again so he said, "What about Zeb? What's his story?"

Layla cast a bittersweet look at the border collie. "Zebadiah's human moved into a nursing home a few months ago and couldn't take him. They were both heartbroken. I call his human fairly regularly to give him updates, and I took Zeb to visit a couple of times."

Eddie fought a lump in his throat to say, "J.R.?"

"Found as a stray. I pulled him from the shelter when no one claimed him. They were happy for him to join us because their adoption rate for seniors is pretty low."

"Tinkerbell?"

Tink looked up, hopeful, but when nothing good happened, her head soon drooped back down to lie on her paws again.

"Her family said they were moving interstate and couldn't take her."

Eddie frowned. "They discovered a state where dogs are illegal?" he said, heavy on the sarcasm.

"I try to believe that people are doing their best, otherwise it's too upsetting, but when dogs get older and become expensive and less cute, they turn up in shelters more often. Sometimes with real reasons and sometimes with excuses." Layla leaned over and kissed the

top of Tink's head. "They'd had her for ten years, since she was a puppy."

"The three of them are lucky to have landed with you," he said and meant it. Anyone could see how much she loved those dogs. He hated thinking about what would have happened to Willow that day if he hadn't stopped, and Zeb, Tink, and J.R.'s fates, if Layla hadn't taken them, were things he didn't want to think about either.

"What about you?" he asked.

"Me?"

"Your family." He gestured in her direction. "Your story. How you ended up here."

"Not much to tell," she said. "My parents are dead and I was an only child."

The words and their delivery seemed too stark. There was definitely more to that story, but she clearly wanted to drop it, so he scrubbed a hand through his hair and looked around, his gaze landing on the tractor. "Before I go, I'll show you the assets we keep, like the tractor. There are also a couple of golf carts that Gran and my aunts use to get around.

Her eyes lit up. "Are you kidding? How much fun are they?"

"Pretty fun, actually," he said, grinning. "Gran is really fit but whatever she's doing, she wants to do it faster. She hates to waste time walking to the pond when she could be there already."

Layla laughed. "That does sound like the woman I've been working with on this plan."

"She has her good qualities, but patience is not one of them."

He thought of his grandmother—tall, imposing, and the only person in his life to consistently put his needs first. There had been times in his life where he hadn't seen her regularly, but never once had he doubted that she was on his side. In his experience, that was a rare trait. Even the fact that she'd asked Layla to keep an eye on him proved how much she loved him—she just needed to stop crossing the line now he was a grown-ass man.

"Have you spoken to her since yesterday?" Layla asked. "Does she know I let her request slip?"

"I haven't called yet, but I will. And I promise not to drop you into the thick of it."

"Thanks."

He dislodged Willow from his lap and pushed to his feet. "I'd better get back to it."

Layla collected the dogs and headed inside, and Eddie went back to the fencing, but he kept thinking about his grandmother. Before calling her he needed a strategy to get her to back off a bit without offending her or hurting her feelings. No one, to his knowledge, had succeeded in getting her to back off before, especially when it came to family, but there would be a way. He just had to find it.

Chapter Four

It had been three days since Layla had accepted Eddie's offer to build the fences, and he'd already finished the front yard on both her place and number six next door. Number five was the cabin with the stone wall so he'd skipped past that, and this morning had started on number four, which meant Layla couldn't watch him work without craning her neck. And *that* she refused to do. Just because a man filled out a T-shirt well didn't mean she had to go out of her way to watch him while he worked. After all, she had a long to-do list of her own.

In between planning, she'd managed to unpack her clothes, bathroom things, and the boxes of food and supplies, so she was beginning to feel settled. And, thanks to Eddie's efforts, the dogs had a front yard so they could wander in and out at will. Everything was humming along nicely. As long as she didn't waste time watching Eddie work.

She was making her second coffee of the morning when her cell beeped to life and the name Valentina Ramirez, one of her foster carers, appeared on the screen. Smiling, she swiped to answer.

"Hi, Valentina," she said. "How's New York?"

"It looks very fine in my rear-view mirror," the other woman said, her accent heavy.

"You're leaving?" Valentina was one of the carers who was coming to live at the sanctuary in less than a week, so it made no sense that she'd have an extra move before that.

"I know your plan was for all of us to move to Applestead next week, but my daughter and her husband were arguing in one room, her kids were fighting in another, and there was something loud and offensive blaring from the TV, and I could not take it anymore. So I grabbed my suitcases, hugged my family goodbye, and pointed my car in the direction of Applestead. I should be there in about two hours."

Layla blinked. "Just like that?"

"Well, I was already packed, ready for moving day, so it was pretty easy." Her voice was less certain as she said, "Is it okay if I am a little early? I have a sleeping bag and can bunk on the floor until the weekend if that makes it easier."

Layla flicked through options in her mind. "No, it's fine—it'll be great to have you here early. The dog fence on the cabin next to mine is done, so you can move in there."

"Next to you?" Valentina said, her voice filled with glee. "We will have so much fun! I cannot wait to see the place and meet the dogs. You will make such a success of this, I just know it."

A ribbon of unease slithered through Layla's belly, but she pushed it away to focus on the situation at hand. "Did you remember to take the directions with you as you ran out the door?"

"They are beside me on the seat. It seems straightforward, so I will see you soon."

"Can't wait." Layla disconnected and looked around at the four dogs. "We're about to get some company."

The unease through her middle returned. Before Valentina had retired and moved to New York to live with her daughter, she'd been the best foster carer Layla had on the books.

She was patient with the high needs dogs, and so warm and affectionate that all the dogs loved her. And Layla certainly didn't begrudge her coming out early—Valentina had worked as a seamstress for an upmarket lingerie company, which had been good, steady work while she had it, but her retirement savings weren't huge. Her only real option had been moving into her daughter's three-bedroom apartment. They'd stayed in touch, so Layla knew the apartment situation was cramped, and Valentina was unhappy. When the deal with Diane for Applestead had been finalized, the first person Layla had called was Valentina. Free accommodation in a cute town, surrounded by dogs was a dream come true for Valentina, and Layla got to have her best foster carer at the new sanctuary. Win-win.

So why was she uncomfortable after the call? Why wasn't she thrilled about having her first resident move into Applestead?

"Anyone want to come next door?" she said, and grabbed the master set of keys.

Zeb, J.R., and Tinkerbell were immediately on their feet. Willow was only a beat behind as she followed Zeb's lead.

Eddie had made a small, wooden gate connecting Layla's yard to the next one—Valentina's cabin. She opened it and left it ajar so the dogs could return to their beds if they got tired. Before heading inside to air out number six, she ducked a couple of doors down to where Eddie was working.

As it turned out, he was working with his T-shirt tossed to the ground.

Layla waited one heartbeat, then another, hoping her throat would work and she'd be able to form words so she could call out to him. His back was to her—broad, and tapering down to his jeans, with a golden tan. Her pulse fluttered.

Before she could compose herself, Eddie turned and caught sight of her. "Hey, Layla," he said, then picked up another three palings. "Need something?"

The expanse of his chest was muscled and had a light sprinkling of dark hair and

Layla forgot to breathe. She'd seen bare chests before, sure, but none had affected her quite as badly as this one. It made her want to touch the planes and angles, to explore—

Eddie raised an eyebrow as he waited for her to respond, so she dragged in a breath to fill her oxygen-starved lungs and said, "Uh, I just wanted to let you know that the first of the new residents, Valentina, will be here in a couple of hours."

"Okay, thanks for the heads up. Which cabin are you putting her in?"

"Since the fencing is complete on number six, I'll move her into that one."

"Good choice. Let me know if you want me for anything." He heaved the palings up and sat them over one shoulder, the muscles of his arms and chest stretching and bunching with the action. "I'll keep going here."

"Right. Good. Okay." Layla turned away and attempted to find her equilibrium.

Over the next two hours, she set about making the cabin ready for Valentina. She opened all the windows to air it out, found the sheets and made the bed, and brought a few pantry staples over from her own place in case Valentina hadn't had time to pack any. The last touch was collecting a bunch of wildflowers from the rambling bushes on the next block and arranging them in a glass vase she found at the back of a cupboard.

The first sign Valentina had driven into town was J.R. leaping to attention, his super-sized bat-ears swiveling in all directions to try to capture the source of the sound. Then Zeb walked out to the front yard, his nose pointing to the approaching white wagon.

Layla walked out onto the dirt road so she could signal Valentina over to the street where she'd be living, and Valentina waved and headed over. When she reached the spot, Valentina threw open the car door and rushed to hug Layla, her long, curly hair flying in all directions.

"Oh, my, this town is fabulous!"

"It's so good to see you," Layla said when they broke apart. "I've missed you."

"I have missed you, too." Valentina adjusted her cherry red shawl and bent to pet all four dogs who were each vying for her attention. "And I have been desperate to meet all of you!"

Eddie came around the corner of the cabin a couple of doors down and raised a hand. "Welcome to Applestead," he called.

Valentina's eyes widened and she cast a quick, sidelong glance at Layla before replying. "Thank you. Nice to meet you…"

"Eddie," Layla supplied. "Valentina, this is Eddie. He's helping out for a couple of weeks until he leaves."

Valentina practically batted her lashes. "Well, it is very lovely to make your acquaintance, even if only for a short time."

"Likewise," Eddie said, then went back to the fencing.

Once he was out of sight, Valentina turned to her, arms crossed under her breasts. "Is that beautiful man the reason you did not want anyone else moving out just yet? You wanted more time alone with him?"

"What? No," Layla said. "I only met him when I moved out here myself. Well, I met him briefly when I dropped in to see the town when Diane first suggested the plan."

"And there is nothing—" Valentina waggled her index finger from Layla to the cabin where Eddie was working and back again "—between you?"

Layla felt her skin flushing but ignored it. "Eddie is Diane's grandson. There's a six-month trial period on this sanctuary and I can't afford to do anything that might jeopardize it. Fooling around with Diane's grandson would be reckless."

Valentina shrugged. "Sure." Then she grinned. "But that is a shame."

Layla thought about Eddie working in the sunshine earlier, shirt cast aside as he lifted the lumber onto his shoulder, and part of her had to agree.

She shook her head to dislodge the image and said, “Let me show you around your cabin.”

As they stepped inside with four dogs dancing around them, Valentina gasped, her brown eyes sparkling. “Oh, Layla. This is really for me?”

The interior was done in mint green and coffee tones, and had the same charming, rustic feel as Layla’s cabin. “It’s lovely, isn’t it?”

Valentina had tears in her eyes as she took it all in. “I didn’t expect this. I thought they’d be run down, maybe needing some work.”

“The rest of the town needs work, but these eight cabins are all well-cared for.”

Valentina slowly moved through the living room to the dining room, feeling the fabric of the sofa, trailing her fingers over the backs of upholstered dining chairs. Then she rushed back and hugged Layla tight.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I have never lived somewhere as beautiful as this.”

The unease of earlier snaked back into the pit of Layla’s stomach, and this time she recognized it for what it was—fear. If she couldn’t pull this plan off, if at the end of the trial period they’d failed, where did that leave Valentina and the others who’d soon be moving in? Valentina had left her home and followed Layla to a tiny, abandoned village, placing all her trust in a scheme that may or may not succeed. Layla tried not to wince as she pulled back from the hug. She’d been so caught up in the possibilities and optimism, but this wasn’t a game—she was playing with people’s lives.

And if she failed, Valentina and the others would pay the price.

Did that make her no better than her parents, regardless of her intentions? Nausea roiled in her belly. She’d spent the past eight years trying hard to be nothing like them, to not cross any lines and always do the right thing. The idea that she could end up in that place anyway was horrifying.

Valentina, thankfully unaware of Layla's inner turmoil, was heading down the hall to see the bedroom. Layla followed, along with the four dogs, reaching the doorway just in time to see Valentina throw herself on the four-poster bed. J.R. leapt up to join her, licking her face and eliciting giggles. Valentina's obvious joy, far from making Layla feel good, only made her think more about what she'd lose if the sanctuary failed, and her stomach squeezed tight.

Then Valentina was on her feet again and caught Layla in another tight hug. "Thank you for inviting me to be a part of this."

"You're welcome," she said through a constricted throat. "But don't forget it's a six-month trial."

"Trial? Pah. You are going to be so good at running a sanctuary—it will be a huge triumph."

The weight of responsibility closed in, pushing her down and she had to get some air or she'd suffocate. But there was nowhere in Applestead to escape. Her head pounded. Perhaps getting out of town for a bit would help her get some perspective. She needed to collect a few more of the dog residents anyway. The idea seemed tantalizing.

"You know," she said with forced brightness, "since you're here, I might do a quick, overnight trip back to Boston tomorrow. I can pick up three more dogs earlier than I'd planned, and a few more supplies too."

"Sure. Take as long as you need," Valentina said over her shoulder, still taking in her new home.

"Great, thanks. In the meantime, let's get your bags out of the car so you can unpack."

Without waiting for a reply, Layla headed for Valentina's wagon. She needed to help the older woman get her things inside then make some calls about tomorrow's impromptu trip. And then hopefully she'd be able to fill her lungs with a full breath again.

*

The next morning Layla was half an hour into the drive, when she had a call from Diane's receptionist Kaye about another form she needed to sign. Kaye offered to courier it out, but since Layla was on her way to Boston anyway, she said she'd drop in as soon as she hit the city. But, by the time she was standing in the reception room outside Diane's private office, Layla was rethinking her decision. The room itself was impressive, and possibly designed to intimidate—something it was succeeding at, with its high ceilings and dark walls covered in the logos for each of the companies that Diane's business owned, from candy bars to frozen desserts along the top row, down to casserole sauces and tinned soup on the bottom row. Diane had a personal assistant, two secretaries, and a receptionist, each with a desk in this large room, each impeccably dressed, their hair fashionably styled and their faces exquisitely made up.

Layla looked down at herself. That morning, she'd grabbed the first pair of old jeans she'd laid her hand on, a faded black T-shirt, her favorite mauve hoodie, and white canvas sneakers. Her hair was pulled back in a messy bun, which displayed the dark roots that were growing in behind the dyed blonde length. She made a mental note to buy more hair dye while she was in town. And to start carrying an outfit in the car that was suitable for… well, most places.

Kaye led Layla to a tall, wooden door and smiled awkwardly. "When I open the door, you'll need to enter quickly so I can close it behind you."

Layla frowned at the weird instructions, but before she could say anything, the door opened and Layla was pushed through with a firm hand on the small of her back. The door shut with a loud and definite click.

"Layla!" Diane said in a stage whisper, and then grimaced as she turned to look at the corner of the room. "Persephone, no!"

Layla heard the movement at the same time as Diane's ineffective command and turned to see an extremely happy long-haired, black and tan German Shepherd take a bounding leap toward her. Layla only had time to brace herself before she was hit with the full force of Persephone's greeting. She wobbled on her feet at the affectionate impact, then the dog landed on the ground and Layla got better footing before Persephone jumped up again, whining.

Diane was around the desk, grabbing at the dog's collar, saying, "That's not how we greet people, darling heart."

The shepherd turned her attention to Diane, and put her paws up on Diane's shoulders, her snout reaching desperately to plant a kiss on her human's face.

"Layla, meet Persephone." On the verge of toppling over, Diane pulled away and retreated to her desk.

With the loss of one target, the dog turned to leap on Layla again, but this time, with some warning, Layla crossed her arms and stepped back, looking up at the ceiling.

Persephone hesitated, and in that moment of inaction, Layla bent down and ruffled her head. "Lovely to meet you, Persephone!"

With the positive attention, the shepherd reared back, ready to leap again, but before she could, Layla crossed her arms and turned her back. Again, the dog hesitated. This time, as Layla gave her affection as a reward, she said to Diane, "Do you have any dog treats in the office? I usually carry some, but they're in the car. I didn't quite expect…"

Diane pulled open a desk drawer and threw Layla a crinkly bag that immediately drew Persephone's attention.

"How long have you had her?" When they'd first met, Diane's old cocker spaniel had recently died, and at their subsequent meetings, Diane hadn't had a dog at all.

"Four days." Diane perched on the edge of her desk. "She's almost nine years old and

they said she was a mild-mannered old lady who wanted the quiet life."

Meeting the dog's wide eyes, Layla opened the bag of treats, praising her, noting the exact moment she decided to jump again, and held up her hand, saying a firm "Uh-uh." Persephone cocked her head to the side, and Layla gave her a treat. "What a good girl you are! And what a great name. Queen of the underworld, hey?"

"Well, she certainly thinks she's the queen of something. And I've heard a couple of people mutter 'devil dog' when they think I can't hear."

"Don't you listen to them, Persephone," Layla said, lavishing her with affection. "You're a beautiful girl."

"I'm sorry you had to walk in on this," Diane said. "I know I'm supposed to be stricter with her and show her who's boss, but I just can't bring myself to do it."

Layla didn't look over, instead keeping her attention on Persephone. "I'm glad you couldn't do it. That whole dominance-based training is ridiculously out of date. No trainer worth their salt uses those methods anymore. You're not trying to challenge her, are you, Persephone? You just want to say hello."

"By leaping on every person she meets and knocking them down?" Diane asked skeptically.

Layla repeated the process of stepping back, watching the dog's eyes, talking calmly to her while holding a hand up, palm out, and when the dog was at her limit and thinking about jumping again, Layla broke the pose and gave her a treat and praise.

"Dogs greet each other face to face," she said to Diane without looking up, "and they want to do the same to humans. You're a bit big to be jumping on people, though, aren't you Persephone?"

"This is the most controlled I've seen her except when she's asleep," Diane said, a thread of fascination in her voice. "How did you know she'd respond to that?"

"These are fairly basic principles that will work with most dogs. But you need to keep practicing, so I'll run through it with you before I leave." Layla ruffled her fur. She really was a lovely dog, just a little exuberant and unsure of the rules. And probably more than a little stir-crazy.

"I can't tell you how much I'd appreciate it," Diane said, crouching beside them and petting her dog. "As would the women in the outside office."

Layla glanced around, clocking the two plush dog beds, water bowl in a fancy stand, and not much else dog-related. "Does she stay in here with you all day?"

"Mostly. She gets regular, short walks during the day, either with me or one of my secretaries if I'm in a meeting. And she has the yard at home once we leave." Diane rubbed one of Persephone's fuzzy, upright ears affectionately. "But it's clearly not working. Kaye is threatening to quit."

Layla went over the process again, of telling Persephone to stay, holding a hand up, stepping back, then giving her a treat and praise when the dog was at her limit. "She's smart, and keen to please. She probably just needs a bit of training and some more stimulation during the day."

"More exercise?"

"If you can manage it, but also mental stimulation. You could get her some dog puzzles and toys for the office. A lick mat would be a good start—it's a silicon mat with bumps on it, so that when you smear food over it, she'll spend ages licking to get her treat. But there are fun puzzles where she'll have to solve the puzzle to get the treat."

"You're kidding me."

"Nope. Smart dogs love the challenge." She knelt down and gave Persephone a good rub down her shoulders and back. "And the reward, obviously. The other thing is that she could get over-stimulated, with all the noise and bustle of an office. Is there somewhere she

can sneak off to if she wants a break?"

Diane frowned as she looked around the room. I suppose I could put a bed in my private bathroom through there," she said, pointing.

"Perfect." Layla grabbed one of the beds and dragged it over to the door Diane had indicated. The room was sparkling white—tiles, vanity, chandelier, everything white. And opulent. "Are you sure you'll be happy retiring to Applestead and leaving all of this?" she asked before she could censor herself.

"No question about it. It will be such a delightful adventure." Her face softened into a dreamy expression. "In fact, I should have timed this better and adopted her just before moving out to Applestead. That way I'd have you there fulltime to help with training."

There was a knock at the door before it opened only enough for Kaye to peek her head around the corner. "I have that form ready—"

She broke off as Persephone launched herself at the newcomer, tail wagging, beside herself with excitement.

"No," Diane called as she lunged after her.

Kaye squeaked, dropped the papers on the floor and then disappeared as the door slammed shut again.

Layla tried very hard not to laugh as a disappointed Persephone pushed her nose into the crack between the doors, but she failed. "Obviously, there's still a bit of work to do."

Diane gathered up the pages and took them to her desk. "By the time I move out to Applestead in a couple of years, she'll probably just have adjusted to coming to work," Diane said ruefully.

"You'll do fine. We'll go through some basic training now that you can practice, and you can order some toys and puzzles. She'll settle into her new routine." Persephone gave up at the door and trotted back to nudge Layla's hand. "Maybe you could employ a dog walker

to take her out a couple of times during the day so that Kaye doesn't quit?"

"That's a good plan. Thank you." She handed Layla a pen. "Sign these so we can get them out of the way and focus on Persephone." The shepherd sauntered over at the sound of her name and Diane held her face. "We'll get this right, Persy. I know we will."

Layla watched them and her heart sighed. The new bond between a human and dog was such a precious thing. And then she spent a couple of hours teaching Diane how to teach her dog some manners.

*

Later that day, Layla knocked on the front door of Autumn's apartment, with her overnight bag over her shoulder. From inside high-pitched barking erupted, alternating with tiny growls.

"It's okay, Goliath," she called through the door. "It's only me."

Seconds later, the door opened and she fell into a hug with her best friend—the only person in Massachusetts who knew her real last name…

And the only person in her life who knew her family's shame.

"I'm so glad you rang," Autumn said. "It seems like you've been gone forever."

Layla hadn't realized she'd miss having a close friend nearby so much. She swiped at the tears in the corners of her eyes. "If there's one thing I could change about Applestead, it would be the commute so we could still have coffee dates."

Autumn stepped back and her long red hair fell forward as she scooped up Goliath, the tiny Chihuahua with a bright blue band around his waist. "Come in and tell me everything."

Layla followed her down the hall to the kitchen, with beady black eyes watching her over Autumn's shoulder the whole way. "How's he doing?"

"He's doing great. He hasn't bitten anyone in four days."

"Oh, Goliath, you overachiever."

Twelve-year-old Goliath had been brought into the veterinary clinic where Layla worked to be put to sleep. The signs of neglect were there—rotten teeth giving him putrid breath, ears full of gunk making him deaf, and nails so long he was reluctant to walk on them—but the reason his owner was giving up was he'd begun toileting in the house. Jarrod, the veterinarian, had explained that these things were relatively easy to fix or address and Goliath likely had many years ahead of him, but the owner said she'd already ordered another puppy from the breeder. After a quick word with Layla, Jarrod had suggested handing Goliath over to the rescue group. Layla had explained about the sanctuary that she was setting up in a few weeks and offered Goliath a place. The woman asked if this meant she'd save the euthanasia fee, and when Jarrod confirmed it would, she handed the little dog over, and left without a backwards glance. Goliath had gone berserk, trying to get outside to his human, calling her back, but she'd kept on walking. For the rest of the day, the staff had taken turns carrying him around, but he only wanted the human who no longer wanted him.

Autumn happened to be there that day—her one day a week at the clinic as the bookkeeper—and she'd offered to keep Goliath until the Applestead sanctuary was ready. Layla's rescue group had paid to have his nine rotten teeth removed, which fixed his breath, his ears thoroughly cleaned, which restored his hearing, nails trimmed which helped him stand and walk better, and had him fitted for a belly band—a soft, padded diaper for dogs—which solved the incontinence issues. And after four weeks of good quality food, his pale cream fur was starting to look much healthier.

"Coffee?" Autumn asked as she fired up her fancy coffeemaker. Layla's love of coffee was nothing compared to her friend's devotion to the brew.

Layla slid onto one of the stools on the other side of the counter. "I'd better stick to water. I've had more than enough coffee this morning to make sure I was alert for the drive.

Time to come down from the buzz."

"I have a new hazelnut and vanilla bean blend." Autumn put Goliath down and held up the packet of fragrant beans.

It was tempting. "That sounds perfect for tomorrow morning to caffeinate me for the drive back to Applestead."

"How's everything going out there?" Autumn filled a glass with filtered water, popped a slice of lemon in it from a bowl in the fridge, and handed it across. "Almost ready for your residents?"

That same anxiety that had been haunting her, niggled in her belly. She tried to ignore it—she'd come to Boston to escape the feeling, not to indulge it. She took a sip of water before replying to ensure her voice was even. "We've made good progress. In fact, you remember Valentina Ramirez? She moved in early. Actually, that's why I could visit you—she stayed with the dogs."

"I remember her," Autumn said, smiling. "She was good with the difficult dogs."

"I'm thinking of putting Goliath with her." She'd considered giving Valentina a second dog as well, if Goliath would tolerate a housemate. Perhaps sweet, unflappable Tinkerbell. As soon as she made it back to Applestead tomorrow, she'd start setting up Valentina's dog household.

At the mention of his name, Goliath crept around the corner of the counter, his tail between his legs, and growled at her.

"She's a friend, Goliath," Autumn said cheerfully. "Remember her? She saved you."

Layla crouched down and held her hand out to the Chihuahua, palm down, so he could sniff her. He edged closer to sniff, then his tail wagged furiously for several sweet seconds before he growled at her again, this time raising his lip, and then scampered away.

Layla sighed. "He's a complex boy."

"He is," Autumn said, "but he's already come so far. I think he'll thrive with Valentina." She pressed the buttons on her fancy machine and it produced a thick stream of steaming, fragrant coffee, then pulled a plate of cupcakes from the fridge and rounded the counter. "Come over to the sofa and tell me why your voice sounded strained a few minutes ago when you told me you'd made good progress at Applestead."

Layla chuckled. "You'd make a good sleuth."

"This is true." They sank down onto opposite ends of the couch, and Autumn tucked one leg beneath her. "But you didn't answer my question."

She took a cupcake from the plate and twirled it between her fingers for a few seconds. "Valentina's arrival made the plan seem more real."

"Isn't that a good thing? Creating a sanctuary has been a dream of yours for as long as I've known you."

"It is good, yes, but…" She swiped a finger through the cupcake's chocolate icing and popped it in her mouth as she detangled her thoughts. "I guess that I'd still been living the fantasy of it, but now—I'm playing with people's lives here."

Autumn sipped her coffee, then replaced the cup on the saucer. "Why would you call it playing with their lives?"

"Valentina has uprooted her life and moved out. Others are moving out in just over a week. They've literally changed their lives around so my dreams can become a reality. What if I fail?" Saying the F word out loud for the first time sounded as stark and awful as she'd expected. The sweet icing suddenly felt sickly in her mouth and her appetite for the cupcake evaporated. She set it back on the plate.

Autumn leaned forward and placed a supportive hand on Layla's arm. "Sweetie, they all signed up for this knowing the risk that it might be short term."

Layla squeezed Autumn's hand as it lay on her arm and smiled her thanks for the

support. But this wasn't something that could be solved by support alone. "I'm not afraid of hard work, but if I slip up, I'm not just failing myself, I'm failing all these people and dogs too."

"But if you succeed, you'll have allowed them to be part of something precious." Autumn's face was pure kindness and love.

"Who am I to succeed?" Tears stung in her eyes but she blinked them away before they could form properly. "Honestly, I have no real idea what I'm doing. I'm making it up as I go along."

Autumn picked up her coffee cup and looked at Layla over the rim. "Sounds like you're nursing a nice case of imposter syndrome there."

"You're probably right, but giving it a name doesn't mean it's not true. People screw up and ruin other people's lives all the time."

"Speaking of your parents," Autumn said smoothly, "have you spoken to them lately?"

Layla ran her hand through her hair. She should have guessed that Autumn would make the connection. "They made their choices."

"So still nothing since you saw them in jail before you left Georgia? That's three years now."

"I can't forgive them. Won't."

"Have you told Diane or anyone connected to Applestead?"

Her stomach dropped. "Of course not. Diane is trusting me with money. I told Diane and Eddie that my parents were dead." Which wasn't a complete lie—they'd been dead to her ever since their crimes were uncovered.

"You are not your parents. Their sins are not yours."

"I volunteered in their charity. Of course their crimes taint me." She pressed a

fingertip to the pain in her temples that always came when she thought of her parents. The whole point of changing her name to Layla Cross was to leave Layla Landingham, daughter of convicted fraudsters, far behind.

When her parents had been exposed for defrauding the charity they worked for, Layla had been mortified. Then the anger had kicked in. Sure, there were other emotional stages she should be cycling through, but anger had stuck hard. The news cameras parked out on the front lawn were a shock to a nineteen-year-old, and the need to testify against them in court, and the aspersions cast on her own character by the charity's national office—well, they'd kept her anger simmering along nicely.

After the court case, she'd changed her last name, dyed her hair blonde, moved across the country, and vowed to do something good to balance out some of the damage her parents had caused. There was still work to be done on that.

She blew out a breath and fidgeted with the edge of the cupcake wrapper on the plate. "Let's talk about something else. How's work?"

"Work's work. Though I'm a bit closer to my goal of working from home in my PJs now The Acorn Café lets me do their books online. The only place left where I have to front up is the vet clinic. At least I can take Goliath with me there, so he's had me around most of the time. You know, if my landlord wasn't checking in each day to see when 'that ratty little dog' is going, I'd consider keeping him. Goliath and I have almost become friends."

Hearing his name again, Goliath peeked around the corner of the ottoman, cast a furtive glance around the room to ensure he was safe, then leapt up onto Autumn's lap and snuggled in with a sigh.

Layla smiled as she watched him. "You've done such a good job with him."

"He's a softie under all that bluster. Aren't you, Goliath?" Autumn crooned.

The relaxed, sweet scene hit Layla right in the solar plexus. "You'll have to come and

visit him and me when you get a chance. There's a spare bedroom in my cabin."

"I'd love to. And I have to admit, I'm very curious to lay eyes on Diane's grandson."

"Eddie?" Layla said and felt a blush creep up her neck. She grabbed the cupcake and took a big bite to distract herself from Eddie.

"Aha!" Autumn pointed a finger at her. "I thought the accounts of your meetings with him were too purposefully casual. Spill. Tell me everything."

The cake seemed to expand in her mouth and Layla struggled to swallow. After a moment, she said, "There's nothing to tell."

"I have exactly zero percent faith in that being true."

"Okay, all right," Layla said, as she tucked some hair behind her ear in what she hoped was a nonchalant gesture. "He's easy on the eyes and he's fun to banter with."

"And…" Autumn raised an eyebrow expectantly.

"And…" She squeezed her eyes shut and spoke quickly. "He gives me butterflies in my belly."

"I knew it," she said, triumphant.

Layla shook her head and held up both hands before Autumn could get carried away. "But he's leaving in just over a week. Plus, he's Diane's grandson, so I'm trying to keep all the lines in the sand clear. There is so much riding on me making a good impression on Diane and her trusting me."

"But if he wasn't Diane's grandson and wasn't leaving in a week?" Autumn's tone was as laced with temptation as when she'd offered hazelnut and vanilla bean coffee earlier.

Layla thought back over her phone call with Diane. "He lost his brother a while ago and I think he's still dealing with that. Plus he doesn't want to be around people much at all." Neither he nor Diane had given her the full story, but she had the feeling Eddie was carrying a pile of baggage.

"Well, that doesn't sound as promising as I'd hoped," Autumn said, deflated. "Okay, I'll leave the topic for now. Tell me, what's your plan for this visit?"

"I bought some dog food and supplies on my way over here. And I'll pick up two more dogs in the morning from another foster carer, then take Goliath and the others back to Applestead tomorrow."

"So until then, it's you, me, Goliath, and all the moonlight margaritas we can stand?"

Layla grinned. "That's about it."

Chapter Five

Eddie sat on his front stoop as he watched the sunlight disappear behind the hills, one hand on Willow's head and the other wrapped around a beer. Spending the day securing palings to the structures at number four and putting the posts in at number three had made him confident he'd get all the cabins done before he needed to leave. Layla had driven out early in the morning and Valentina had spent the day settling into her new cabin, so he'd been on his own, left to his own thoughts, just the way he liked it.

Usually.

He frowned as that thought insinuated itself. Lifting the beer bottle to his lips, he took another swig.

Hell, even his dog was behaving out of character. Willow had hung out with Zeb and the others, only coming back when Eddie finished working.

The town seemed different, emptier, without Layla in it, which was ridiculous because he and his family had been coming here since he was a kid and Layla had only been

here for just over a week. Yet, without her fresh positivity and open heart, the town was quieter now, its energy flat. Or maybe that was just him.

Also, without her here to distract him, a certain task had been on his mind all day—calling his grandmother. He still hadn't spoken to her since she'd recruited Layla to spy on him, and it was past time he put some boundaries in place.

He looked up at the rose-gold etched clouds and finished the beer. Then he took out his cell and punched in the numbers of his grandmother's private line.

"Eddie, darling. How unexpected and marvelous to hear from you."

"Do you have a minute?"

"Hold on." There was a muffled sound, as if she'd put her hand over the speaker and was talking to someone. "Okay, now I have a minute. About ten of them, actually. What do you need?"

Ever since he could remember, she was always asking what people needed, rather than simply wanting to catch up like most grandmothers did. Perhaps if she'd been able to do that, this discussion wouldn't be necessary.

"Gran, I know you're worried about me, but you don't need to be." He spoke calmly and clearly, so there would be no misunderstanding. "I'm an adult and I can take care of myself."

"Eddie, that's terrific to hear," she said brightly.

"So, I need you to back off a bit and give me some room to deal with things my way."

She let out a small sigh. "Layla told you."

"Not voluntarily." He'd promised Layla that he wouldn't drop her in the mess, so he chose his words carefully. "She was acting weird, watching me too much, so I dragged it out of her. Gran, asking her to keep an eye on me wasn't fair on her or on me."

There was a small silence on the other end of the line, then, "Okay, that's a fair

criticism. I'm sorry. On another topic, after you leave Applestead, I know a private investigator here in Boston who would love to give you a job."

Eddie wrapped a hand around the back of his neck. Conversations with his grandmother often left him feeling like he had whiplash, so he should have expected she'd move on from his reason for calling quickly, even if the new topic also entailed her hopping right over his boundaries. "You're looking for jobs for me now?"

"Not in general. This one just came across my desk. You remember him—he came out to Applestead a couple of times. Alex Sabbatini."

"Alex Sabbatini?" he said slowly as he placed the name. "You mean the guy you told me was a *security guard* from *Springfield* who'd been dropping by for years to check on Applestead?"

"That's the one," she said, clearly pleased he remembered the man. "Alex said he'd love to have someone with your skillset working for him."

Eddie ran his fingers through his hair, releasing a light sprinkle of saw dust. "He wasn't checking on Applestead, was he, Gran? You paid him to drive out from Boston and check on me."

"Darling," she said, her voice suddenly serious. "I love you and I won't apologize for doing whatever it takes to keep you safe."

Eddie rested his head in his free hand and closed his eyes. The problem with his grandmother was that she was a force of nature—very difficult to stop once she got started. That gave him two options. The first was to be confrontational—stand up and object so strongly that she'd have to pull back—but she was his gran, the person who loved him the most in the entire world, and he refused to hurt her. The alternative was a softer approach, which was what he'd been trying. And which hadn't been successful so far. Maybe he could push just a little more.

"Gran, I appreciate everything you do for me more than I can say, but you need to give me some space."

"Good idea," she said, not missing a beat. "I've been thinking along the same lines. I wouldn't need to check in on you if I got you one of those companions. Someone to keep you company. Would you prefer a man or a woman?"

Eddie opened his mouth but no words came out. Was she being serious?

"Gran, are you talking about hiring me a *sobriety* companion? Like you did for Dad after he came out of rehab?"

"Of course not!" She sounded indignant. "You're not an alcoholic so you don't need a sobriety companion. Just someone who would be nearby in case you ever need them. Like a friend."

His head was beginning to pound. Had he thought she was a force of nature? She was worse. And one thing was becoming very clear—she wasn't going to stop. If he tried to disappear into this forest, she'd probably hire a team of mercenaries to retrieve him. As long as she was worried about him, no matter where he went, she'd find a way to keep tabs on him. She had the determination and the money to do it.

There had to be a way to convince her that he was fine now and that she didn't have to worry. A way that wouldn't hurt her or their relationship yet would re-establish a proper boundary.

He scrubbed his hand through his hair and looked around, his gaze falling on Layla's yard and front door, and an idea struck. Should he…? Dare he…?

"Gran, that won't be necessary," he said, smiling as he spoke so his voice would sound happy. "We didn't want to tell you this so early, but Layla and I are together. A couple. She's my, um, girlfriend." Could he sound more awkward about it?

"You and Layla," she said slowly. "After little more than a week?"

"Well, we met each other a few weeks ago, remember? When she came out, the, um, sparks flew and we stayed in touch." He winced. A lifetime of prioritizing honesty hadn't prepared him well for this. He inhaled deeply and pressed on. "By the time she moved out here we already knew. Before I met Layla, I wouldn't have believed in love at first sight, but I guess miracles happen." He held his breath. Had he laid it on too thick or had she bought it? The miracle line might have taken it too far…

"Oh, darling, that's wonderful!" she said, sounding a little choked up. "And now I see why you wanted me to back off. New couples need their space. I'll fade discreetly into the background. Consider me back on normal grandmother duties."

Eddie sat up straighter. Had he done it? Was it that easy? Had he really convinced his grandmother to leave him alone? A smile spread across his face, a real one this time.

"Look," he said, needing to end the call before he tripped himself up in his own lies, "I have to go."

"Actually, I need to go too—I just saw the time. But I'm so happy for you. Love you!"

The call disconnected and Eddie held his cell in front of him, looking at it, wondering what the hell he'd just done. The full implications of his rash solution were dawning on him. In fixing one problem, he'd created another. How would Layla react once she knew he'd involved her in a lie to his grandmother—the one person she seemed intimidated by? Would she go along with his story, or hang him out to dry? He swore under his breath.

Willow sat up, stretched, and then leaned into his chest. Her ears were cold—there was a chill in the air now the sun had gone down—so he rubbed them to bring some warmth back into them.

"Right, Will. I'll need your powers of persuasion on my side when Layla gets home. Because we have an almighty favor to ask her."

Willow wagged her tail and licked his cheek, and Eddie just hoped that Layla's support would be as easy to secure.

*

Layla arrived back in Applestead the next day about noon, with Goliath riding shotgun in his little car harness. The other two dogs she'd picked up were in the back seat—despite being many times Goliath's size, it was safer for them to be away from the Chihuahua and his teeth. Goliath had a policy of not backing down from anyone, no matter how big.

She glanced at Mr. Darcy the greyhound in her rear-view mirror. He stood with his long nose out the window, looking effortlessly tall, dark and handsome, before turning worried eyes to her.

"It's okay, Mr. Darcy." The greyhound had a sensitive soul and wasn't one hundred percent sure he wasn't being taken to his doom, so she added, "This is your new home. You'll be safe and loved here for the rest of your life."

Layla mentally crossed her fingers that she wasn't making promises she couldn't fulfill. All she had to do was make sure the trial period went smoothly, for Mr. Darcy's sake as well as the others depending on her.

As she pulled up outside her cabin, Doris sat up in the back seat and yawned. After the first fifteen minutes, the little spaniel cross had slept the entire way.

Valentina was already at the driver's door when Layla opened it.

"Welcome back! I've been on the edge of my seat all morning, waiting to meet our new residents."

Layla handed Goliath over. "I'm hoping you and this little guy hit it off. But he usually takes a while to warm to people so he's going to need your special touch."

Valentina took him and held his little body against her chest. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Goliath."

Goliath bared his teeth.

"Aren't you just the cutest thing?" Valentina cooed. "But, okay, message received—you're a man who likes his space."

"A whole lot of space," Layla said. "You can take his incontinence band off so he can mark the bushes, then we'll put a fresh one on before he goes into your cabin."

Valentina put him on the ground and removed the band and Goliath proceeded to pee on everything he could reach, including a few branches that were higher than Layla had expected. Determination was a powerful force.

She turned to find Eddie approaching. Even with the deep frown that creased his forehead, the sight of him set her heart thumping.

"Hi," she said and opened the back door to get the other dogs out.

He flashed her a tight smile. "When you have a minute, I need to talk to you."

"Now's not great." She unbuckled Mr. Darcy and he leapt gracefully to the ground. "Can you hold him while I get Doris out?"

"Sure," he said without missing a beat, and took the greyhound's leash.

Layla leant into the car, lifted Doris and took her over to the hedges. Doris stood on her wobbly legs, relieved herself, then took a few steps away and stumbled. Layla was there before her bottom could hit the ground to scoop her up again.

"Doris is unsteady on her legs at the best of times and she'll be stiff from the long drive." She turned to Eddie. "Can you hold Doris too while I get Valentina and Goliath set up?"

"Not a problem," Eddie said and reached for the spaniel, his hands brushing hers as she passed Doris over. "But then I need to talk to you."

"Absolutely." She risked a glance at him. The intensity in his dark blue eyes set off the butterflies in her stomach that she'd told Autumn about, and her hand tingled where he'd

brushed it. She dropped her gaze to the little dog cradled in his arms, and who leaned back against Eddie's broad chest. The breath Layla drew in was shaky. This was not helping.

She turned to Valentina, clearing her throat as she tried to bring her focus to the rest of the dogs. "I'm thinking that Goliath and Tinkerbell will get on well. She's so laid back that he won't be intimidated and will be able to relax."

"Good idea," Valentina said. "Let's see how they go."

Layla greeted Zeb, Tinkerbell and J.R. first so they were calmer, then Valentina brought Goliath in and set him down near Tink. Unfortunately, one look at the black Labrador sent Goliath into a panic. He ran straight for J.R. on the other side of the room, practically colliding with him, then sat in the frame created by J.R.'s front legs. J.R. looked up at Layla, eyes wide, huge bat-ears pointing straight to the ceiling, clearly mystified.

"Well then," Valentina said. "Tinkerbell might not be his perfect match after all."

They all watched as J.R. sniffed the new dog all over, then laid down and let Goliath cuddle in next to him. Huh.

Layla blinked. That possible match had not even been on her radar. In fact, the terrier would have been her last pick for Goliath.

"How do you feel about trialing Goliath and J.R. together?" she asked without taking her eyes off the dogs.

"I'd be delighted," Valentina said.

Five minutes later, as Layla stood out near her car watching Valentina disappear through her front door with J.R. and Goliath, Eddie crossed the park to reach her. He had Doris cradled in one arm and Mr. Darcy's lead looped around his other wrist, and his hair was ruffled as if he'd been running his fingers through it.

"Layla, I really need to talk to you."

She drew in a deep breath and met his gaze, ignoring the heat that rose from her chest

to her throat then settled on her cheeks, and pretended he was just another man.

"Okay, sure. I have some time now."

He glanced around. "We might be better talking at my place."

"You worried about wire taps and spy cams?"

"Just being overheard through windows."

No sign of a smile, and his eyes weren't dancing. He was serious.

"Okay, how about you take Zeb and head over and I'll settle the others and be there in a few minutes?"

"Don't talk to anyone else before you leave. Especially not my grandmother."

"Now I'm intrigued," she said lightly, pushing down a twist of anxiety. She wanted him to smile, to allay her sudden fear that something bad was about to happen.

Instead, all he did was give her a quick nod then leave.

After she had the new dogs inside her cabin, she surveyed them, hands on her hips. "Right, you three. I have to go out for a few minutes to hear the biggest secret to hit Applestead in at least a week, and you have to wait here."

Doris's ear twitched. Mr. Darcy whined softly. Tinkerbell snored. The dogs didn't know each other yet, so she settled them in separate rooms so they all felt safe while she was gone, and headed over to Eddie's place.

She hesitated at his open front door. Half of her didn't want to know if something had gone wrong this early in the trial. Squaring her shoulders, she went in and closed the door behind her so they wouldn't be overheard. Apparently that was a priority. Zeb and Willow were curled up together on a thick pile rug in the middle of the living room. Zeb wagged his tail when he saw her but didn't come over.

"Coffee?" Eddie asked, as he came around a corner. "Tea? Juice?"

Layla shook her head. "Just serve up the big secret."

"Right," he said and dug his hands deep into his jeans pockets.

She crossed her arms and waited. *Please don't let it be something that will upset the dog sanctuary plans.*

Eddie opened his mouth to speak, frowned, and closed it again. Curious. In the time she'd known him, she'd seen him cranky, amused, and helpful, but she hadn't seen him lost for words. She wasn't sure why she found that reassuring, but oddly it was.

"Hang on," she said, her relief making her giddy and a touch playful. "Let me guess. You didn't leave the army—that was your cover story and you're here monitoring a threat to our national security."

"What?" His brows drew together. "Of course not."

"Okay, so you did leave the army, but you were immediately recruited for an X-Files type group and you're here watching the local UFO activity."

"Layla, please just—"

But she was in the groove now. "Oh, I know. You're hosting a new reality show and you've been playing one long prank since the day I arrived."

"Layla, I told my grandmother that you and I are dating."

The room tilted. She took a step back, then another, until the sofa hit the backs of her leg and she plopped down. "Us? You and me."

"Us," he repeated, his voice as rough as gravel. "You and me."

She tried to fill her lungs, but they'd stopped cooperating. *Us. You and Me.* It just made no sense. And the consequences…

She shot to her feet, her hands clenching at her sides. "You lied to the person who holds the fate of the dog sanctuary in her hands and you involved me in that lie?"

He winced. "It was unplanned and I didn't think it through. I'm sorry."

"Call her back!"

He eyed her in silence for a long moment. “I’d rather not do that if we can avoid it.” He gave an apologetic half-shrug.

“Call her back and tell her you were mistaken,” she insisted. All her hard work. Everything she’d built could come crashing down and she had to stop it.

“Or,” he said, “I don’t call her, and we let her believe it’s true.”

“Or,” she said, “I call her, tell her it’s not true and beg her not to take Applestead away from me.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Why would she take Applestead?”

“She’s trusting me with this town, trusting my decisions, trusting my moral compass, and to do that she’s had to take a lot on faith. If I get involved in a deception, then she’s going to start questioning things.” Maybe even start investigating those things. And if Diane found out that her parents were in prison for stealing from the charity they worked for, the whole sanctuary plan would be over.

“Or she’ll be so grateful that you’d helped her favorite grandchild that she’ll say, ‘to hell with the trial period, I’ll sign the paperwork now’.”

She arched an eyebrow. “You seriously think that’s even a remote possibility?”

“Well, no. But—and here’s the good part for you—if we’re fake dating, I’ll need to stick around longer. I can build more fences and fix more stuff.”

For one sweet moment she allowed herself to be tempted—it would make so much of a difference to have Eddie’s help for three more months. But she couldn’t let herself get carried away with dreaming. Besides, it was a strange thing for him to offer, which made her suspicious. “Why would you even want to do this? Why lie in the first place?”

He rubbed his stubbled chin with two fingers as he said, “I’m having a slight problem with my grandmother and my solution to that problem wasn’t well thought out.”

“I’m the solution?”

"In a manner of speaking."

Layla hesitated. She was used to people relying on her to fix things, but Eddie had struck her as someone who'd want to handle his business himself. Despite the panic hovering around her, she was intrigued. "What problem could possibly be fixed by a fake girlfriend?"

He wrapped a hand around the back of his neck. "Remember when she asked you to keep an eye on me?"

"One of my top ten awkward moments since arriving in Applestead."

"Well, it seems you weren't the only one she asked. And I realized that she was going to keep getting more creative and ambitious in her efforts. Seat?" He indicated the chairs around his polished wood dining table and she took one. This was definitely a conversation she needed to have sitting down. He remained standing, gripping the back of a dining chair across from her as if his life depended on it.

"You're thinking that a girlfriend has a built-in babysitter capacity." That actually made some sense.

He straightened. "I wouldn't say babysitter, exactly."

"Childminding?" she supplied. "Supervision?"

"Intimate enough to notice whether things are okay or not."

"And Diane believed you? That we're dating after knowing each other such a short time?"

He shrugged. "I can be convincing."

She surveyed him. The cranky demeanor and plaid shirts held an element of misdirection. He had some charmer skills. "Is that what you're being now? Convincing?"

"I started that way, but we left convincing about five minutes ago," he said, the lines around his eyes crinkling.

She nodded. It was true—he was talking to her, letting her weigh up the facts.

"I'm not saying I'll do it, but what would this plan of yours entail?" She wasn't seriously considering it, but the idea of pretending to be Eddie's girlfriend, of having an excuse to be near him, felt dangerously alluring.

"Here's the beauty of the scheme. My grandmother isn't here, and no one in the town knows her. So nothing changes. Just mention how sane and stable I am whenever you're on the phone with her. After three months, I'll call her and tell her the sad news that I broke up with you, you'll act devastated in a phone call—"

"I'll be devastated?"

"Well, I was a good boyfriend," he said, shrugging a shoulder.

"I don't know. Hypothetical Girlfriend Me bakes pie for her hypothetical boyfriend. I think you'd be pretty devastated yourself."

"But we need me to be the bad guy so you get my grandmother's sympathy."

"Right. Okay. No letting Diane get mad at me for breaking your heart." Absolutely not. Diane held too much power.

Of course, *lying* to that very woman who held too much power might not be the smart move but Diane wasn't squeaky clean herself—asking her to spy on Eddie in the first place meant she didn't get the moral high ground. Which led back to Diane's original request to keep an eye on him. She ran an assessing gaze over his features, looking for clues in the depths of his dark blue eyes, the fine lines along his forehead. If Diane's instinct was right, maybe this was the right thing to do. Maybe all Eddie needed was a friend.

"So just a few phone calls," she said. "Nothing else?"

"Nothing else."

She turned the idea over in her mind, looking from every angle. What if Diane *was* right? If Eddie needed someone nearby and Layla refused twice—both Diane's request to keep an eye on him, and Eddie's plan now that would keep him close—and something

happened to him? Diane would judge her harshly for that. She sighed. Which meant that there was no way to know how this would play out if it went badly. All she could do was make the best decision she could now.

"What if Diane shows up out of the blue?"

"My grandmother is double and triple-booked every moment of the day. She doesn't do drop ins."

"And in the meantime, you'll work for the sanctuary, getting us ready?"

"Whatever you need." He held his hands up, looking like the angel of helpfulness. Well, if angels were scruffy and could make her think forbidden thoughts. Maybe the fallen angel of helpfulness.

"That's very appealing," she said, trying to keep her attention on the topic, "but if this goes pear-shaped, Diane will forgive you—you're her favorite grandchild. I seem to be carrying all the risk." As sticking points went, it was a big one.

"In the unlikely event that she finds out, I'll take full responsibility. I'll tell her it was my idea, that I coerced you, and you agreed against your better judgement." He grinned. "No risk to you, only gain. Scout's honor."

She chewed on a thumbnail. Three months of Eddie's help in the town was priceless. There were so many other jobs on her list that he could complete in that time, really getting the sanctuary set up well. And since he'd already told Diane they were dating, it would be messy to extricate herself now…

But if she was going to do this, she was going to bargain for something big off her wish list.

"I really need to fix up the old laundry in the hotel and make it a place we can wash and groom the dogs. Somewhere that makes it easy for senior dogs, and also the senior residents here." She'd been fiddling with designs of ramps up to a bath so the dogs could

easily get in, and the people wouldn't have to bend down too far. Taps with hose extensions; tables with non-slip surfaces to clip the long coats in summer. "It's not a small job."

"I'm your man." He poked a thumb at his chest. "Nobody can convert a disused laundry into a dog grooming parlor better than me."

"Okay, I'll be your fake girlfriend," she said, sending up a little prayer that she was doing the right thing. Though did God help if your prayer was about a fallen angel?

"Thank you," he said and smiled. "You won't regret this."

"But the minute things look shaky for me or the rescue with Diane, we come clean."

"Deal," he said and shook her hand.

The feel of his palm sliding along hers sent shivers across her skin and she had a sinking feeling she'd just made a deal with her own personal devil.

Chapter Six

Layla sat on a hard, wooden chair in the Applestead Hotel reception room, surrounded by the newest residents, human and dog. On her left, Hank and Alberto had the blue Great Dane, Billy Bob, between them. The three Small White Fluffies were on the other side of the room, with Valentina and new arrival Nell, all three with their gazes locked on the big, blue monster. At least they'd stopped barking. Billy Bob barely noticed them, far more interested in the ear rub Hank was giving him.

Rhonda perched on a chair apart from the others, her dark blue skirt smoothed over her knees, her practical purse on her lap. Beyond polite niceties, she'd barely said a word since arriving. Rhonda was the only resident who wasn't already one of Layla's foster carers, so she was a mystery. The negotiations for the town had included a condition that Diane and Rhonda would both be involved, and Diane had also reserved the right to bring other friends once she retired and moved out permanently. Yet sitting among the other initial residents, Rhonda looked out of place, uncomfortable. Diane had assured Layla that Rhonda wanted to be here, to be involved with the dog rescue... Perhaps she was just shy. Layla flashed her a

reassuring smile—that wasn't returned—then forced herself to let it go and focus back on the others.

She'd gone through introductions and given a basic rundown about the sanctuary. "So, basically," she said, summing up, "we're the trial phase. There are the six of us and eleven dogs, and we're muddling through, working it out as we go along, and seeing if this model is feasible. If we succeed, we'll be open to taking in new dogs, and a few more carefully chosen carers as well."

"And Eddie," Valentina added. "There are six of us plus Eddie."

Layla felt the familiar warmth spread across her cheeks and prayed it wasn't visible. She hadn't been sure what to say about Eddie's role—she was still processing their new fake relationship status—so it had been easier not to mention him at all.

"True," she said, "we have Eddie here helping out with building dog fencing and general maintenance, though he's not an official part of the sanctuary trial." She tried to smile to make it all seem like nothing was out of the ordinary—*no fake boyfriend here!*—but it felt awkward so she dropped it. "Questions?"

Hank, a tall man with silver streaks in his brown hair and gold-rimmed glasses, leaned forward. "We've been fostering Billy Bob for three weeks so I'm assuming he'll stay with us?"

When he heard his name, the Great Dane swung his massive head around to gaze adoringly at Hank.

"If you're happy to keep him," Layla said, "that would be great. Maintaining as many routines and as much stability as we can for the dogs is a priority."

"We were hoping you'd say that," Alberto said, exchanging a smile with Hank. He pushed up the sleeves of his blue shirt, revealing surprisingly muscled, dark brown forearms. "Billy Bob has already wrapped us around his paw."

Valentina chuckled. “It looks like that feeling is mutual.”

It was true. Billy Bob was the sixth foster dog Layla had placed with Hank and Alberto—the other five had been adopted, but there was an extra level of bonding going on this time.

“Ideally we’ll also place another dog with you. In the first phase while we set up, I’m just bringing in all the dogs we currently have in foster, so most houses will have two dogs. Once we’re established, we’ll expand, so some houses will have a larger pack.”

Hank grinned. “Bring it on. We adopted our kids as a sibling group, so we had the three of them arrive at once and upend our lives. Now they’re grown and all flown the nest, we’re up for however many hounds you want us to have.”

Layla grinned back. Hank and Alberto were perfect for her plans for the sanctuary’s future. “We’ll let Billy Bob meet the others this morning and choose a new friend.” She looked around. “Any other questions?”

“Nope,” Nell said. “I’m good to get started.”

Layla crouched down and petted the three Small White Fluffies. “How do you think the three are getting along?”

Nell had been fostering Crystal for three months while the little dog had some veterinary work done, and had taken in new foster Princess a couple of weeks ago. She’d picked up Burrito from another foster carer on her way out to Applestead this morning.

“Pretty seamless, actually.” She pushed her silver, wildly curly hair out of her face. “I thought there would be fights. Especially from Crystal—she has a healthy sense of entitlement—but she’s been good so far.”

Layla gave Crystal an extra rub behind the ears. “Are you happy to keep Burrito with the girls, and have all three?”

“Sure. One more won’t make much difference on my bed at night.”

"Okay, excellent. I've allocated you the cabin with the stone wall, number five, because the wall should be enough to keep these three in. Valentina, can you take Nell and the white fluffies over and show her around? We'll come and help with bags a bit later."

"We are going to be neighbors," Valentina said brightly to Nell, and then scooped Burrito and Princess up and led Nell and Crystal out the door.

After they left, Layla pulled up a chair between her remaining three carers. "The first step is to choose a cabin. Let me tell you about the available ones."

Rhonda shook her head, her carefully styled gray bob swinging. "I know these cabins. I'll take number three."

"Okay," Layla said. "That one is free, but just checking—you know it's the smallest?"

"That's right. I'll have that one."

"Done." Layla turned to Hank and Alberto. "Out of the others, you two might like number four. There's a gorgeous tree in the back yard, and the yard itself is quite large, which would be good for Billy Bob. The only other one is number two, which has bright orange and yellow wallpaper throughout."

Alberto's dark eyes widened. "Number four it is." He turned to Hank, who nodded, and added, "We're just keen to meet Billy Bob's new sibling. Aren't we, Billy Bob?"

The huge dog raised his head and gave a slow blink as he looked from person to person.

"He can't wait," Alberto said, deadpan.

Layla pushed to her feet. "Let's go and see who he likes then."

She led the group outside and along the street, waving to Nell and Valentina as they passed number five, Rhonda lagging a few steps behind. As they passed number six, J.R. and Goliath came running to the fence; tiny Goliath snarled his warnings but J.R. wagged his crooked tail optimistically. Layla spoke to them for a few moments and promised to come

back later.

"There are four dogs at my place for Billy Bob to choose from, though Doris is unsteady on her feet and Billy Bob is so big that he could easily knock her over."

Alberto placed a hand on Billy Bob's head as they walked. "Don't listen to her. You're very graceful on your feet." But he looked at Layla, shaking his head, and whispered, "Like a drunk rhino."

Layla chuckled.

As they reached Layla's place, three dogs came out to greet them, and Doris was lying in her bed on the porch. Zeb had a quick sniff of the new dog though the fence, then, apparently satisfied everything was in order, raced to the side fence to wait for Willow. Mr. Darcy seemed stunned by Billy Bob's size—he tucked his tail between his legs and slinked inside the house. Tinkerbell remained, wagging her thick tail, her eyes squinting in pleasure at the unexpected treat of human and dog visitors.

"Well," Layla said, "Tinkerbell might be our answer through a process of elimination."

Hank reached over the fence to rub Tink's ears. "Nice to meet you, Tinkerbell."

The Labrador just about exploded in bliss, and Layla had a good feeling about the match.

"Let's see how they go together." She drew a leash from her pocket and clipped it on Tink's collar over the fence, then opened the gate and led her out. "Alberto, if you and Billy Bob want to walk over to the park, we'll follow along."

Within a few minutes of synchronized walking, including reciprocal sniffing of bottoms and praise from the humans, Billy Bob and Tinkerbell were walking side by side as if old friends.

"That was easy," Alberto said.

Layla shrugged. “They’re both pretty laid back, which helps.” She handed Tink’s leash to Hank. “Keep walking around the park and let them sniff what they want. See what you think about Tink moving in with you.”

“Will do,” Hank said, and the two humans and two dogs set off.

Layla watched for a couple of minutes, but it was so smooth, she left them to it and returned to Rhonda, who was waiting on the verge.

As Layla neared, she said, “Thanks for waiting.”

Rhonda flashed a quick smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “It’s fine.”

“So,” Layla said, “what sort of dogs do you like?”

Rhonda grimaced and pulled her dark gray cardigan tighter. “I’m really more of a cat person.”

“Oh,” Layla said. “Do you have a cat?” It hadn’t occurred to her that someone might arrive with a cat, and she hadn’t made any arrangements for where one might live.

“No,” Rhonda said. “They shed too much to keep one.”

Layla waited a beat, unsure if she was being pranked. Who moved their whole life to a dog sanctuary when they didn’t like dogs? She couldn’t get a read on the woman except that she seemed incredibly closed off and… maybe unhappy. A tiny stab of concern rippled through Layla’s stomach.

“Did Diane explain that we’re transforming the town into a senior dog sanctuary? That the humans who live here will be involved in caring for the dogs?”

“She did,” Rhonda said without giving anything else away.

“Okay, good.”

A door closed and Layla looked up to see Eddie heading out, Willow dancing at his heels. From this distance, she could appreciate the shape of him—perhaps it was the military background, but there was something different to most people in the way he stood. Straight-

backed, feet always planted with a good center of gravity, as if he could catch a heavy weight if it were thrown at him. Despite coming from a wealthy family, he seemed born for the military, yet he'd left. He'd rejected his family's path in business, and then the military too, and now he was seemingly living without a plan. Which made her wonder— did Eddie have dreams? Besides avoiding people and finding another remote home with his dog, what did he even want out of life?

He spoke to Zeb over the fence and the border collie sprinted to the gate, waiting. As Eddie unraveled a leash, he glanced over and held up a hand in a quick wave. Then his gaze drifted to the woman at Layla's side and he froze.

Frowning, Layla looked from Eddie to Rhonda and back again. Eddie's reaction was making her nervous. *What was going on?*

Rhonda didn't seem to notice anything odd in Eddie's behavior as she stepped forward. "How are you, Eddie?"

In what seemed like a very deliberate move, the tension in Eddie's body transformed into loose-limbed ease, and he closed the distance between them before casually draping an arm over Layla's shoulders. "Good to see you, Rhonda. I didn't know you were visiting."

It took every ounce of self-control for Layla not to jump at the unexpected touch. This was the closest she'd ever been to him, and after she recovered from the surprise, she tried to follow his lead and be all cool, calm and collected, but the trail his fingers were following, up and down her upper arm was making that increasingly difficult. He felt good. Solid and warm at her side and she caught traces of cedar and lemon lingering around him. She drew in a deep breath and became a little lightheaded. Being this close to Eddie Fitzpatrick was intoxicating. She wasn't exactly sure what was happening—he'd said nothing between them would change—and the brain fog his nearness induced wasn't helping, and part of her didn't care. A large part, as long as he kept holding her against him. She'd just

have to trust Eddie knew what he was doing.

Rhonda shrugged. “Diane is moving out so I’m moving out. Though I’m the advance guard, and it will be a while before she comes.”

Eddie’s fingers stopped in their path down her upper arm and clenched into her flesh for a split second before loosening again.

“Excellent. We’ll have to catch up once you’re settled in.” It sounded like his words were forced between clenched teeth. He looked down at Layla. “Sweetheart, can we have a quick chat?” He looked back at Rhonda. “Sorry to interrupt.”

Layla nodded, trying to pull herself together despite Eddie still being plastered to her side. “Sure. Rhonda, how about you head down to number two and start settling in, and I’ll be down soon to talk about a dog.”

“That’s fine.”

As she turned to go, Eddie said, “I’ll grab the bags from your car when I’ve walked Willow.”

Rhonda flashed another smile that was closer to a grimace and left.

“What do you need?” Layla asked as she extricated herself from his surprisingly good—albeit fake—embrace.

“Let’s talk inside,” he said grimly.

They walked through her gate, Willow and Zeb enjoying a joyous reunion, until they reached her kitchen. “Okay, what gives?”

“You didn’t tell me Rhonda was coming.”

“I didn’t tell you Hank and Alberto were coming either.”

“This is different,” he said, sweeping the comparison aside with a wave of his hand. “Rhonda used to be my grandmother’s housekeeper.”

“And we have an anti-housekeeper policy because…?”

"She was a live-in housekeeper and she stayed on at my grandmother's place after she retired. She's fully enmeshed in my grandmother's life. She's been sent here as a spy."

Layla arched an eyebrow. "Should we give her a code name?"

"This is serious, Layla." He stood with feet shoulder-width apart, expression serious, every inch a military man on a mission. "She's here to spy on me. To report back to my grandmother on how I'm doing."

"I thought you said our fake relationship had fixed that." Layla glanced out the kitchen window in time to see Valentina walking J.R. and Goliath down the street.

"When did you know Rhonda was coming out?"

"From the beginning," she said, turning to look back at Eddie. "It's even in the contract—one of Diane's strings."

"Then she was already in play before my phone call. So my grandmother is letting her plan stay the same." He planted his hands low on his hips. "Or maybe she updated her instructions to include spying on us. Either way, if she's here as a spy, this changes things."

Layla tensed. "Changes things how?"

"We have to start acting like a couple."

Layla's stomach sank. This plan was always going to cause her grief. "Part of our deal is that we don't have to pretend we're actually dating."

"That was before my grandmother moved the pieces on the board to form a check mate."

Layla swore. He was right. "Okay, I need to spend time today helping the new residents settle. But tomorrow morning, you and I will be meeting to work out how we're going to fix this."

"I'll pick you up at nine. I need to show you around the town anyway, so we'll do both things at once. That way we'll be far enough away from the cabins to talk undisturbed."

"Can't wait," she said on a sigh and headed out to find Hank and Alberto.

*

Rhonda stared out the back window of her new home, unseeing. It seemed she was destined to live out her twilight years in a dog-themed town with people she mostly didn't know. And dogs. Lots of dogs.

Needing to do something with her restless energy, she turned and paced the cabin, but it was no use. It only reminded her that she was trapped.

She stopped and scrubbed her hands over her face, then opened her eyes to find she was standing in front of the hallstand. Of course she was. Perhaps it was habit to reach for her purse, perhaps her subconscious knew what she needed. Bracing herself, she pulled a worn photo from a zippered pocket and gently stroked a fingertip over the face of her husband. Dressed in his wedding suit, he was bursting with pride and love. How young they'd been. Optimistic. When he'd proposed, he'd gone down on one knee and said, "Let's get married and have a houseful of kids and grow old together." She'd been so in love she'd knelt on the floor with him and covered his face in kisses, whispering, "Yes, yes, yes."

Some days she couldn't bear to flip the photo over and see the faces on the other side. Today was one of those days. She tucked the photo back into the safety of the zippered pocket and wiped away the tears that had sneaked out the corners of her eyes.

The day her husband and two young children were killed, she'd been at work at Diane's house. The police had knocked on the door and, when they'd told her about the truck taking out her husband's car, she'd crumpled, wishing she'd died with her family.

Diane had been a tower of strength—organizing people to pack up the rental house, putting everything into storage and moved Rhonda into the guest quarters at the back of her own house.

"You're not alone," she'd said fiercely. "You'll never be alone. I'll always look after

you."

Diane had been as good as her word, and Rhonda was devoted to her for that kindness.

A knock on the front door made her jump. She found a tissue in her purse and wiped it over her face, removing all traces of her emotional lapse. Then she straightened her blue skirt, lifted her chin and opened the door.

Layla stood on the other side, holding the leash of a tall, bony, black dog with a long nose. "Can we come in?" she asked.

Rhonda hesitated. She could say it wasn't a good time and ask her to come back later, but, realistically, there would never be a good time for this, so she opened the door wider and stood back to let them through.

"First, I want to check in with you since we were cut short when Eddie needed to talk to me." She smiled. "Sorry about that."

Rhonda closed the door behind Layla and the skinny dog. "I have nowhere else to be, so it's not a problem."

"I have to ask," Layla said slowly, as if choosing her words with care. "You don't seem that thrilled to be here. Are you sure you want to be part of the sanctuary?"

What someone wanted and what they got were rarely the same thing. But the woman in front of her, with her blonde ponytail that bobbed as she walked and her plans to save the world, was likely too young to realize that yet.

Rhonda pulled the edges of her cardigan together over her chest. "This is where Diane and I agreed we'd move."

A tiny frown line appeared between her brows but was gone again before it could properly form. "Okay. And are you happy with this cabin?"

She could see the doubt in Layla's eyes—wondering why someone would deliberately

choose the smallest cabin when others were available. But the smaller the space, the less to clean. She'd had enough of cleaning floors and dusting surfaces to last several lifetimes. Originally, she hadn't planned to stay as a housekeeper. Her husband had plans for them, dreams. But then he'd died, and she'd become stuck, unable to see a way forward without him.

Her lungs became tight, so she forced them to fill with air. "It's perfect."

Layla nodded, then said brightly, "I've brought a dog to trial. To see if you get on together."

"So I see." The pathetic creature leaned against Layla's legs, long nose pointed to the floor as the humans spoke.

Layla crouched so her head was on the level with the dog's. "This is Mr. Darcy. He's seven years old and he's a greyhound."

Someone else to look after, to clean up after. Rhonda peered at his coat, trying to see if it was shedding. "What does he eat?"

"I'll drop over morning and night with his food, and Valentina has offered to walk him when she takes J.R. and Goliath out each day. All you need to do is interact with him. Give him some affection. Love him."

Love him. Rhonda wanted to laugh. As if it were that easy.

Layla unclipped the leash from his collar, but the dog didn't move.

"Eddie has built small yard fences at the front and back of each of the cabins, so as long as the gates are closed, you can let Mr. Darcy roam around.

A dog roaming around her house. She'd have to keep anything precious up high. "Is he toilet trained?"

"Absolutely. If you leave the back door open during the day, he'll take himself out when he needs. And I'll come along regularly and pick up the deposits he leaves in the yard."

Rhonda glanced around the compact room. “Where will he sleep?”

“I’ll drop over a couple of beds right away. Greyhounds don’t have padding like other breeds, so they really need soft beds. I’ll bring you two to start with and you can decide where they go.”

Rhonda nodded. “Sounds like you’ve covered all bases.”

“I hope so.” Layla planted a kiss on the dog’s long nose. “I’ll leave you to get to know each other.” She stood and the dog took a couple of steps to follow. “You stay here, Mr. Darcy. Rhonda is going to look after you, and I’ll be back with your beds in a few minutes.”

With a quick wave, Layla slipped out the door, leaving them alone. The dog turned slowly to her and they locked gazes, each assessing the other for long moments. Occasional blinking was the only indication that he was a living, breathing being.

“You seem like a nice dog,” Rhonda finally said. “I’m sorry you got stuck with me. Dogs don’t like me. Most people don’t either, for that matter.”

The dog still didn’t move, not even a muscle.

“Maybe if we just keep to our own spaces, we’ll muddle through fine. A live and let live approach.”

The dog continued to stare with his large, brown, soulful eyes and, before tears could form in her own eyes again, Rhonda turned away.

Chapter Seven

Layla stood in front of her closet, chewing her thumbnail as she surveyed her options. Most of her clothes were practical, chosen for their ability to withstand whatever a senior dog could shed, drool or leave on it, and since today was another day at the sanctuary, any of the options hanging before her should be fine. The fact that she was meeting Eddie in ten minutes so he could show her around the rest of the town, and have *that* conversation about their fake relationship, shouldn't matter at all.

Shouldn't.

But it did.

By the end of the day everyone would know the story that they were dating, which meant they'd have to act like a couple from this point on. The tour of the town would be seen as lovebirds sneaking off on their own.

How much effort should she be devoting to sell their pretence? Her bright red sweater level of effort, or her normal button-down shirt and jeans?

"What do you think, Doris?"

From her spot in the middle of the bed, Doris glanced at the clothes then back to Layla, unimpressed by anything she saw, and settled her muzzle back on the soft blanket.

"Okay, sure," Layla said, "I'll grant you that there's nothing spectacular there, but I think spectacular would be going too far anyway."

"Hello! I am here." The heavily accented call from her front door announced Valentina's arrival.

"In the bedroom," Layla called back. "I'll be out in a sec."

She threw on her favorite faded jeans and a form-fitting blue sweater. Not dressed up for a date, but not her most stained clothes either. A compromise in the level of effort for the non-date.

Layla scooped up Doris and walked through to the living room. "Thanks for coming over."

"No problem. I have already walked and fed J.R. and Goliath, and they are napping, so it is good timing."

"Eddie's going to show me the parts of the town I haven't seen yet, and I didn't want to leave Doris alone all morning. Can you nip back and forth to keep an eye on her in case she wants to go out to do her business?"

"Sure," she said with an exaggerated smile. "You take your time with the gorgeous man."

Layla drew in a breath. That was as good an opening as she was going to get, and she really did want to tell Valentina herself before one of the others told her. She hated lying to her friend, but the fewer people who knew the truth, the less chance of a slip up and Diane finding out.

"Valentina, Eddie and I are… um…" She adjusted Doris in her arms.

Valentina waited expectantly, then when no extra information was forthcoming, supplied, “Going on a tour around the town today? You told me that already.”

“Yes. And…” How to even say it? The words stuck in her throat. This lie was for a good cause, but it was a lie all the same.

“Might be late home? I will be fine with the dogs. You enjoy yourselves.”

“Um… No. It won’t take all day. But the thing I want to tell you is that Eddie and I are…” The words dried up. Lying made her feel sick—another effect of her parents’ subterfuge.

“Oh!” Valentina’s eyes widened. “He is your boyfriend! You are kissing friends!”

Kissing Eddie? She pictured him leaning close, his lips brushing hers, the heat of his mouth, and she suddenly felt about five degrees warmer. “Uh, yes.”

Valentina grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her in for a hug over the top of Doris. “I knew it! From the very start I saw the way you looked at him. I knew there was something about this man that is special to you.”

Doris squirmed and Layla pulled out of the hug, surprised at how easy convincing Valentina had been. Never underestimate the power of wishful thinking in a born matchmaker.

“Something about him,” she echoed.

At the sound of boots crunching on the gravel path, Valentina glanced over at the door and excitedly whispered, “He is here.”

Despite herself, Layla smiled. At least this convoluted plan was making someone happy.

“Morning, Layla. Valentina,” Eddie said from the doorway.

Layla's smile faded as she looked at him and she bit her lip. A pair of old jeans hugged his hips and thighs, then fell in straight lines to his boots. Tucked into the jeans was a soft, worn red T-shirt, under a black coat.

It wasn't that she'd never seen Eddie in jeans before, or even in similar clothes, but still… her pulse skipped along a little too fast.

Valentina cleared her throat melodramatically, and Layla almost jumped out of her skin. She'd been blatantly checking Eddie out in front of someone else. *In front of him.* Though Eddie looked as uncomfortable as she felt so she had to wonder if he'd been doing the same thing. Or perhaps he'd clocked her gaze and it had made him uncomfortable. She found another smile and tried not to be creepy.

"Oh, you two," Valentina said. "There is no need to be coy. You can do the kissing in front of me. I would not mind one bit."

Layla's heart missed a full beat and Eddie's gaze flew to hers.

"I guess you told her," he said.

"Sure did," Layla said brightly. "About five minutes ago."

Valentina took Doris from Layla's arms and settle on an armchair. "So you do not have to hold back for me."

"Right," Eddie said. "Yeah, of course."

He crossed the room and swept Layla up in an embrace, then planted a kiss on her cheek. His body heat leeched through his clothes to reach her and he smelled so good that, for a split second, Layla's knees buckled before she regained her footing and stepped to the side.

She swallowed hard to get her throat to work, then said brightly, "We should get going. There's a lot to get done today."

"Absolutely." Eddie nodded. "Willow's at the gate. Are you bringing Zeb?"

"I get it," Valentina said. "It is still too new for public displays of affection, yes?"

"Something like that," Eddie said, edging toward the door.

"You two are so sweet. How long has it been? Layla didn't tell me how you hooked up."

"Well," Eddie said. "It was…" His voice trailed off as he turned panicked eyes to her.

Layla grabbed her denim jacket from the hook by the door. "We really do need to get going. How about you pop over tomorrow morning for coffee, and I'll tell you all about it then?"

"Okay." Valentina shrugged. "But I expect all the juicy details."

Relieved to be escaping the scrutiny, Layla waved goodbye to Valentina and ducked out the door. Layla called Zeb and Eddie signalled to Willow, and they headed off. At Eddie's cabin, they took a left, heading away from the main street and the park.

"Have you been down this way yet?" he asked, eyes fixed firmly ahead of him.

"Not really. I've walked a little way with the dogs, but I tend to stick to the areas around the park and the pond. The places you've been maintaining and mowing."

"Not a bad plan."

Zeb and Willow raced ahead, tails wagging as they sniffed and explored. Wherever they were, Willow kept a close eye on Zeb, but Layla noticed that Zeb was watching Willow just as closely. They were becoming a team—a special needs girl and her hearing-support dog. A senior boy and his best friend.

Further down the street, Eddie led her into a yard surrounded by a large number of timber buildings. "Back in the day, this was the heart of Applestead's economy."

Hands on her hips, she looked up at the front of the main building. Something had been written in large lettering, but it was too faint to make out the words. "What did they make here?"

"Apple cider. They'd press the apples and bottle the juice here, then take it out to surrounding towns."

"I guess in a small town like this, a lot of the people would have been employed in this business."

"That's right," he said, putting his hand above his eyes to shield the sun. "Pickers were needed in the autumn and the apples would be stored in the cool store over there." He pointed to a building with no windows. "People were needed to run the cidery and there was a bottling line and a side business turning the waste product into pig feed."

The image of the townsfolk working together and a picture of selling products sparked a flurry of ideas. "Is the machinery still there?"

"Most of it was sold off years ago, long before my grandmother bought the town, and what's left is rusted and falling apart."

"Shame," she said, her enthusiasm dropping a notch.

He raised a dark brow. "You thinking of going into the cider business?"

"We're going to need to find ways to become self-sufficient by the time the trial period is over." She glanced around, half hoping that a solution would magically appear.

"There are still heaps of apple trees around, but a plant like this would need a serious injection of funds to get up and running. Not to mention expertise."

"Funds and expertise we don't have." She sighed as she let the idea go.

"You'll find a way that works for you."

She nodded. That was a problem for another day. "So why did you bring me here?"

He strode over, unhooked the latch, and rolled one large barn door back. Layla squinted into the dark interior and made out a large shed with high ceilings. Inside were the shapes of farm equipment.

Eddie pointed to the left. “Ride on mower, golf carts, and tractor.” He walked in, flicked a switch which flooded the room with bright light. A musty aroma of packed earth and dried grass rose surrounded her. She followed as he continued pointing. “Along that wall are handheld pieces of equipment. Brush cutter, hedge-trimmer, leaf blower, and so forth.”

Layla went from one thing to the next. Everything was shining and lined up with, well, military precision.

Eddie opened cupboard doors to reveal a line of shovels, rakes, hoes and other long-handled tools all hanging from hooks across the back wall of the cupboard. “Self-explanatory,” he said then moved on. He continued through the shed as he showed her more cupboards and drawers, everything neatly in its place and gleaming.

When they were done, he turned the lights off and closed up, then took her around the corner. There were piles of lumber, stacked according to length. “This is the remnants of one of the old apple sheds where they’d store the apples before pressing.”

“The timber you’ve been using for the dog fencing?”

He nodded. “After I’m gone, if you need lumber for more fences or other projects, there’s heaps here.”

Her stomach twisted at his casual reference to a future when he wouldn’t be here. It was hard to imagine—Applestead was already entwined with Eddie Fitzpatrick in her mind. Also, in a short time he’d already become her safety net for the sanctuary. He’d been problem-solving and working as hard as she was to get the place functional. But all she said was, “Good to know.”

They walked farther down the street but the street itself started to look less like a road and more like a wide, rough path.

“Was this always a street?” Layla asked.

"It would have originally been a dirt road like the others, but over the years the grass and weeds took over and the gravel and dirt washed away. Since the shed's along here, I drive down on the tractor and ride-on mower, so that keeps the weeds from taking over too much."

Zeb burst through the undergrowth of a nearby overgrown hedge, Willow only a step behind him, and ran to Layla.

She laughed and rubbed his head. "You're loving this, aren't you, Zebediah?"

Zeb's tongue lolled out the side of his mouth as he panted. Willow danced over to Eddie, falling into step at his heels.

"When we leave," Eddie said, scratching the Dalmatian's ears, "Willow is going to miss Zeb like crazy."

"Zeb will be the same," she said as she looked fondly over at Willow. It would be such a shame to separate the friends. "You can always leave her here if you want."

"Actually, I was thinking the opposite." He straightened and dug his hands deep into his pockets. "What would you think about letting me adopt Zeb? Take him with us."

Layla's heart clenched tight, as it always did when there was an enquiry about one of her fosters, or they found a forever home. "The plan for the sanctuary is that the dogs would live out their senior years here, but following the best interests of the dogs is always my guiding principle."

"Zeb and Willow are clearly happier together." As they set off walking again, he looked pointedly at the dogs, who'd teamed up once more and were back to exploring. "And that would give you an extra spot for a new dog."

And that was sometimes the only reason she could bear to let them go. Good homes for senior dogs were few and far between, and normally she'd snap this offer up. But the point of opening the sanctuary was that she'd have a bigger capacity. As they grew, they

could take in more and more seniors and she wouldn't have the constant pressure of finding them homes. They'd be in their home.

"Let me think about it," she finally said.

"Sure," he said. "We're not leaving for a while yet."

They'd walked past the occasional old cabin, all in various states of disrepair, but she caught sight of one that was different. Bigger—more a rambling farmhouse than a cabin, and different in style. A wide porch wrapped around the front, and windows peeking from the high-pitched roof hinted at an attic.

"Oh," she said on a long breath.

One corner of Eddie's mouth hitched up. "Yeah," he said.

The paint—what was left of it—looked like it had once been yellow, and there was a row of panelled windows across the front.

"I had plans to restore a few of these places that are further from the main road, starting with this one."

The enormity of what her sanctuary was costing him hit her square in the chest. Not just his home and job, but also plans and dreams. His future. Maybe not a forever future, but a slice of his future. "Eddie." She turned to him and waited until he brought his eyes to her before she continued. "I'm sorry. This is another thing I'm taking from you."

"Are you kidding?" He tucked his thumbs in his belt loops and gave her the lopsided grin that could make her melt into the dirt. "Can you see the state of this place? You're not taking it from me, you're saving me a whole lot of work and trouble."

She smiled as she knew he'd intended, but she wasn't so sure. She looked back at the house. "Can we look around?"

"Sure. It's not safe inside—the floors need a bit of work first, but you can explore the grounds."

That was all the invitation she needed.

*

Eddie followed Layla and the dogs around the side of the house. He had a quick look over the farmhouse as he went, as he always did, to ensure the roof hadn't fallen in or any other calamity had befallen it. This house was his favorite in the town. When he was a kid, he used to sneak off and spend hours exploring the rooms and attic, and it was a place he'd wanted to share with his nephew Jonathon if he'd had the chance. The previous owners had left a bunch of belongings—junk really—but it meant the place had been a private cubby house and life-size pirate's treasure chest all rolled into one.

He didn't linger though. He wanted to see the look on Layla's face when she realized what was around the back.

As they rounded the corner, she stopped, then turned to him, eyes alight. "An apple orchard!"

"Calling it an orchard is a stretch," he said, holding back a smile. "There are some self-seeded trees and a few sturdy originals clinging to life."

She walked into the field, then her steps tumbled into a run, Zeb streaked past, doing figures of eight around her and even letting out an excited bark.

"There are apples on these trees," she called back.

"And all over the ground," he pointed out. "Rotting apples everywhere."

"Are they edible?" Layla and the dogs slowed to a walk, and stopped in front of him, all three breathing heavily from the exertion. Layla's cheeks were pink, her pale green eyes bright. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

He cleared his throat. "Sure. Willow and I eat them all the time."

She reached high and picked a perfect, shiny red apple from a branch. "They're like Christmas baubles."

"But tasty," he said, and was rewarded with a dazzling smile. Then she turned back to the tree and he tried to think of something clever to say that would bring that smile back to him.

Before he could think of a single thing, she said, "Do you know what variety this is?"

"That one's McIntosh. There are more of them here because it was originally a McIntosh orchard, but there some Baldwin trees sprinkled through that self-seeded from other orchards in the town. They won't be ready to pick for a few more weeks, and even then, they're better in pies, so I'd stick to the McIntosh if I were you."

She rubbed the apple against her soft blue sweater then bit into it. The crunch was crisp and loud, and Eddie was momentarily mesmerized by her mouth moving in rhythm as she chewed.

He cleared his throat and attempted to clear his head. "Good?"

"Delicious," she said and took another bite.

To distract himself, he grabbed an apple from the ground that was still in pretty good condition, pulled a Swiss army knife from his pocket, and smoothly cut it into quarters. He threw Willow a quarter, which she caught in the air, then after two bites, swallowed. She was an old pro at foraging for apples. Then he threw Zeb a quarter. Zeb instinctively caught it, then spat it on the ground to sniff. Seemingly satisfied, the border collie picked it up again and chewed, before moving closer to Eddie's feet and doing his very best sitting.

Eddie grinned and threw each dog one of the remaining quarters.

Layla threw her empty core into long grass and reached for another. "We should take some of these back for the others."

"Good idea. There's more than enough for the humans and the dogs."

"We can't carry many," she said, surveying the field. "How about we walk back and get a car?"

"It will be quicker if I just jog back to the shed and get one of the golf carts." It would give him a few minutes to gather himself again, to stop getting lost in her smile. Plus, coward that he was, it would give him a small reprieve from the conversation they still hadn't had. "You wait here. I won't be long."

"Sure," she said. "I might try a couple of other apples while you're gone. In the interests of testing the product before handing it out, you understand."

"Naturally," he said and set off.

The dogs stayed with Layla. Willow was so focused on her new best friend, she hadn't seen him leave. He was serious about adopting Zeb when he left—Willow would be heartbroken if she had to leave without him, and Zeb… well, he was clearly attached to Willow, but also to Layla. Eddie frowned. It seemed there was no perfect arrangement, someone was going to be sad at leaving someone. Layla's smile popped into his mind and he got the same feeling in his chest as when she shone one on him in person. Of course, appreciating a pretty smile wasn't the same as the bond Zeb and Willow had, but he'd miss seeing Layla smiling at him all the same.

He unlatched the barn door and slid it back, then grabbed four buckets, climbed in a golf cart and set off back to Layla. First order of business when he reached her had to be working out the details of their plan.

When he pulled up at the orchard, the dogs came bounding over, Zeb at the front, but Willow quickly overtook him. After a quick greeting, he took the buckets across to where Layla was standing among the apple trees. She'd lost the excited light that had been in her eyes when he'd left.

"Thanks," she said as she took a bucket. "We need to talk about how we're going to pull off this fake relationship, or it will be time to go back and we'll have managed to avoid the topic entirely."

"You're right," he said and set the other buckets down. "Where do you want to start?"

"Probably with our history." She picked a red apple and put it in the bucket. "It was pretty clear this morning when Valentina was asking questions that we need to be on the same page about our story."

As she stretched to pick another apple on a higher branch, her blue sweater lifted, revealing a narrow expanse of creamy skin across her stomach. His breath caught high in his throat.

"Okay, starting points," she said as she plopped the apple into her bucket. "It's pretty common knowledge that we met on the day I drove here to check out the town. What else did you tell your grandmother?"

He blinked hard and tried to refocus on the topic and ignore what her sweater was doing. "Just that we had sparks when we met. I might have laid it on thick about love at first sight."

"Good. That helps with the short time frame. Anything else?"

He cast his mind back. "I told her we stayed in touch after that first day."

"Smart thinking. Okay, how about we say we spoke on the phone. It started out mainly about the town, but quickly evolved into more, until we were talking a couple of times a day."

"We fell for each other over the phone. That's good. Sounds solid." He cut another apple into quarters and threw the pieces to the dogs.

"And then I moved out and we started sleeping together."

"Hey," Eddie said in mock outrage. "What makes you think I'm easy? Just because I'm a guy don't assume—"

She shrugged one shoulder. “Our love story is on a tight timeframe. Plus, we’re not exactly surrounded by wining and dining options. I figure we probably fell into bed out of sheer boredom if nothing else.”

“*Hey*,” he said again, this time more serious. “First you think I’m easy and now you only slept with me because you were bored? What next? I was a bad lay?”

He wasn’t exactly sure where that reaction was coming from, but it had something to do with him being dazzled by her smile while she was thinking she’d only sleep with him out of boredom.

“Eddie,” she said in the same voice he’d heard her use to calm a distressed dog. “I’m sure you’re very good in bed. Stellar. Two thumbs up—”

“Enough with the mocking,” he said, eyes narrowed.

“—but we’re making up a story for a totally fabricated relationship. None of this really matters.”

He put the bucket down and crossed his arms over his chest. “Fake Boyfriend Me seems to be a lot hotter for Fake Girlfriend You than the other way around.”

“Look, Fake Girlfriend Me thinks Fake Boyfriend You is pretty much sex on a stick, okay?” Color rose up her throat to reach her cheeks. Either saying something that stark embarrassed her… or maybe there was a kernel of truth about that for Real Layla.

They stayed, staring at each other, challenging, for long moments. Until he realised his breathing was a little heavier than usual.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said. “I got caught up in the story. Which was ridiculous.” He winced. It was beyond ridiculous.

She shrugged and looked away. “Well, that’s a good sign at least. If we take it seriously, then others should believe it.”

She was right, but he was still annoyed with himself. “Let’s get back on track. What else do we need to work out?”

“I guess we should know a bit more about each other. It will seem weird if Valentina realises you don’t know basic things about me, or your grandmother realises I don’t know them about you.”

He shifted his weight from one foot too the other. Being an open book wasn’t in his nature, but he’d have to make something of an effort.

“So maybe a couple of games of Twenty Questions. We also need to practice touching each other.”

“Wait, what?” She stilled, her hand in the process of reaching for an apple that dangled from a branch.

“You practically jumped out of your skin yesterday when I put my arm around your shoulders in front of Rhonda, and today in front of Valentina, you totally tensed up.”

She blew out a long breath and continued picking the apple. “And that will be a dead giveaway.”

“Okay, here’s my plan. When we’re together, we play Twenty Questions. And for now, we’ll practice casual touching.”

She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and bit down before saying, “Here?”

“There’s no one else around.” And he really didn’t want to be caught in the lie by Rhonda, not when it was a fairly simple fix.

“True.” She planted her feet firmly on the ground, set her shoulders and nodded. “Okay, let’s do it.”

He raised a brow. “Boring in bed and bracing yourself for my touch. Honestly, Layla, are you trying to flatter me?”

She huffed out a breath and her posture relaxed, “Sorry. It’s just… I wasn’t expecting this.”

He took a step closer. “I promise it won’t hurt.” In fact, now he had a point to prove.

He reached out and rested a hand on her shoulder, let it run down her arm to her elbow. To her credit, she barely flinched. Barely. He moved behind her, letting his fingers lightly drift along her collarbone.

“Arms, hands and shoulders are the things we’ll probably touch most in front of people,” he said. He laid an arm along her shoulders in a similar move to the one he’d made in front of Rhonda. This time she didn’t jump. He kept walking, circling, prowling, casually touching her arms, her back, her shoulders. Until there was no reaction from her at all. Then he let his fingers graze her neck, her throat… and she shivered. His eyes flashed to hers, checking she wasn’t uncomfortable, but her lips were parted, her pupils dilated. He held back a groan.

“My turn,” she said, her voice a little uneven. “You can dish it out, but let’s see how you go when you’re on the receiving end.”

“Do your best,” he said softly, challenging.

Following his pattern, she slowly circled him, but she didn’t touch. Just moved, so close he could feel her body heat. He stayed glued to the spot, waiting, his pulse increasing the longer she took. Then she paused in front of him, her hand grazing his cheek, moving down, sweeping over his throat, and his lungs drew an involuntary, sharp breath. Her hand continued down, reaching his collar, then came to rest, palm flat, on his chest.

“And if we need to kiss?” she asked. “To convince someone?”

His heart thumped hard under her hand. His voice was a hoarse whisper as he said, “Then we kiss.”

Her eyes flared and he swallowed hard, then he gently pushed forward, the pressure of her palm at first resisting, then giving way as her hand slid up, wrapping around the back of his neck, pulling him the last inches to her.

Her lips tasted of apples and sunshine and heat, and he heard himself groan as his arm snaked around her waist and pulled her closer. He kissed her like he needed her, needed this, couldn't live without her. Her mouth was soft and felt as good moving against his as it did when she used it to smile at him. He thrust his fingers into her hair, wanting her closer, closer…

Then the fog in his brain lifted for a split second and he remembered where he was. Who he was with. Who he was.

This wasn't real. They were practicing. Getting used to each other. She wasn't kissing him because she wanted him, she was desensitizing herself to his touch.

And if he did have feelings for her, he'd want the best for her, which certainly wasn't him. There was no use kidding himself, he was still in a bad place, guaranteed to hurt anyone who got close enough. And Layla? He'd seen her with those old dogs—she had a soft heart. He'd taint it, crush it.

He pulled back, swore softly under his breath, and released her. Layla's gaze was soft and unfocused, and he couldn't bear to look. He'd been just as disoriented moments ago. So he turned and grabbed a bucket. "We should head back. There's a heap of mowing I need to catch up on."

"Right," he heard her say from behind him. "Yes. Of course." She shook her head then picked up another of the buckets and started filling it with apples. "Lots to do."

He wished he had the skills of diplomacy and finesse, to smooth things out, to understand what had happened and then explain it to Layla. But he was just him. And whatever else was true, he knew that would never be enough for her.

Chapter Eight

As they rode back to the cabins in the golf cart, a dog on each of their laps, Layla tried to regain her bearings. They'd been practicing touching, but it had felt so real. Real enough to forget where she was, and real enough to forget why she was there. The only thing she hadn't forgotten was who she was with. Afterwards, they'd loaded the buckets of apples, only speaking when they needed to, both doing their best to appear like it was any other day. But her world had tilted at his kiss—well, from the first moment he'd run his fingers along her arm—and it had yet to right itself.

Eddie sat beside her now, his hands tightly gripping the cart's steering wheel, head tilted a little to the side to see around the Dalmatian on his lap. The sleeves of his familiar checked shirt were rolled up to his elbows, and she couldn't drag her gaze away from his forearms. Dark hair covered tan skin and with every adjustment he made to the steering wheel, the muscles bunched and released. She wanted to run her fingertips along that skin the way she had in the abandoned orchard, to feel those forearms around her again as he kissed her senseless.

As they approached the main road, Eddie slowed the cart, looking off into the distance.

Jolted back to reality, she followed his line of sight. “What is it?”

“Car,” he said, then as the shape became more distinct, “Police chief.”

Her stomach lurched as it always did at the thought of law enforcement being close enough to look her in the eye. “Is that bad?”

The sense of responsibility for the people here, the fact that she was in charge should anything go wrong with any of the residents was now a familiar weight on her shoulders.

“Maybe, maybe not,” he said, easing down again on the accelerator. “She drops in every so often to check on things.”

They pulled over in front of her cabin, and, as the cruiser pulled up beside them, Eddie and Willow jumped out.

“Just wait, Zeb,” she said with a hand on his collar. “Let’s see what happens before we barge on in.”

A uniformed, dark-haired woman in aviator sunglasses climbed out and tipped her head to them both. “Eddie,” she said. “I see you have visitors.”

“Sergeant Stefanopoulos,” Eddie said. “Not just visitors. You have new residents to serve and protect.” He pointed to Layla. “This is Layla Cross and she’s your new point of contact for Applestead.”

Layla stepped out onto the grass verge, Zeb leaping off her lap as she started to move.

The police chief stepped closer and offered her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Layla shook the proffered hand. “You too.”

Sergeant Stefanopoulos glanced at the row of cabins and then at Nell walking the small, white fluffies in the park. “You buy the town from Diane?”

“Diane is donating it to my non-profit. We’re setting up a senior dog sanctuary here.”

The police chief pulled her sunglasses off by one arm, her expression morphing from serious to bright and enthusiastic. “Man, that’s a great idea. My boxer Millie will be twelve this year.”

Layla grinned. “A boxer? I bet she keeps you on your toes.”

“She doesn’t believe in slowing down to take account of her age, that’s for sure.” She smiled as she shook her head. “You need anything, you let me know.”

“Thanks, we will.” The police chief seemed great—any fan of senior dogs got brownie points—but police in general still made her nervous. Even though her parents had deserved to be arrested for their crimes, being woken at six in the morning by a group of officers banging on the front door had left its mark on the teenager she’d been. “Is there a problem that calls you out here today?”

“Not really. Just checking on things. I try to visit regularly.” Her gaze slid to Eddie. “Though I’ve been meaning to mention that Anderson got a job down in New York.”

“The big smoke,” Eddie said, one corner of his mouth hitching up. “He’ll do great.”

The officer rested her hands low on her hips and watched him closely. “We’ll be advertising for a replacement soon.”

Eddie’s smile dropped and he turned his head, as if suddenly interested in what was down the road. “Good luck with that.”

The police chief was undeterred. “You should consider applying.”

“Thanks for thinking of me,” he said casually, glancing back to her, “but I’m just showing Layla the ropes then I’ll be moving on.” His voice was genial, but there was something else behind it. If she wasn’t mistaken, Eddie Fitzpatrick was horrified at the idea of being a cop.

“That’s a shame,” Sergeant Stefanopoulos said and replaced her sunglasses. “Make sure you drop in at the station on your way out of the area to say goodbye.”

"Will do," he said, bending to stroke Willow's ears.

"Okay, if everything's good here, I'll head off." She climbed back into her cruiser. "Nice to meet you Layla."

"Likewise," Layla said. "Maybe you could bring Millie out for a visit sometime."

"I might do that."

Layla waited until the police cruiser was moving off before turning to Eddie to ask what that had been about, but Nell and the small, white fluffies were approaching so she put a pin in the question and waved the other woman over.

"Nell, I have something for you." Layla knelt to greet Crystal, Princess, and Burrito. "And maybe something for all you sweet things as well."

Nell raised a dark, perfectly-shaped eyebrow. "Is it something smelly to roll in? Because that's pretty much all Burrito is interested in today."

"Oh, Burrito," Layla said, laughing down at the tiny boy who was happily panting up at her. "It's better than that."

Eddie appeared beside her, holding a bucket of their bounty. "Freshly picked apples. As many as you want."

"Are you serious? I love apples." Nell plucked one from the top of the bucket and shined it on her shirt. "These look good, but do you mind if I grab some later? It's hard to carry anything while I'm managing these three."

"If you want, I'll walk you back now and carry whatever you want," Eddie said. He was always doing and saying things like that, as if serving people was second nature. So, why would he so immediately dismiss the idea of being a police officer earlier?

Layla did a double underline on that mental note and nodded to Nell. "I'll check in with the others while you do that."

As Eddie, Nell, and the three white dogs headed off, Layla popped Zeb and Willow

into her yard and took a couple of apples down to Hank and Alberto's place.

When she knocked there was a deep, rumbling "woof" from inside, that was loud enough to be heard two states away.

"It's okay, Billy Bob," she called. "It's just me."

Moments later, Hank opened the door and Billy Bob and Tinkerbell rushed at her in joyous enthusiasm. Time slowed as the two large dogs galloped closer and she realised she was no match for their combined momentum. Her hands, holding the apples, couldn't grab the door frame, and the hesitation in deciding whether to throw them into the air or not cost her any time for self-preservation. Then Hank grabbed her arm, narrowly saving her from going head-over-heels and time returned to normal.

She blinked, surprised to find herself still upright. "Those two make a formidable team."

Hank stood between the Great Dane and the Labrador, who both had their tongues lolling out the sides of their mouths. "They sleep most of the day, but, yeah, if they're rushing at you, watch out."

She held out the two shiny apples and before she could explain, Alberto appeared, dusting his hands on an apron tied around his waist. "Why do I feel like I just stumbled on a scene from a fairy tale?"

"If I'm Snow White," Hank said jovially, "I want to know why these two animals aren't helping with the housework."

"Because they're dogs, Hank," she said. "You need birds and squirrels for the chores."

Tinkerbell plopped her butt on the floor, her thick tail swishing along the wood.

"Look," Alberto said. "Tink's helping with the sweeping. Good girl, Tinkerbell. You can come and sweep the oatmeal that I've just dropped on the kitchen floor."

Overjoyed at having her name mentioned, Tink threw herself on her back, exposing her belly hopefully. Alberto obliged with a tummy rub.

"Despite not being an evil queen, I come bearing apples. Actually, I have buckets of them—these two are just for illustration purposes."

"Buckets?" Hank said, taking the apples and rolling them around in his large hands.

"Eddie took me to an abandoned apple orchard and we filled four buckets. But there are heaps more if you want them."

Hank glanced at Alberto before saying, "We've been thinking about finding something we could do to fill our days. A project."

Still on the floor rubbing Tink's belly, Alberto nodded at Hank. "We still have that catering equipment in storage we could bring out."

Hank and Alberto had run a diner in New York before they retired to Boston, so if they had some cooking equipment, chances were it was something better than Layla's one kitchen appliance—her French coffee press.

"You thinking of cooking the apples?" she asked.

"We could bake some up into pies for the others," Hank said.

Homemade apple pies? Layla's mouth began to water. "If you're happy to, I think you'd be pretty popular."

Alberto stood, stretching to his full height, and dusting his hands on his jeans. "We could try out some dog treat recipes too."

"Zeb and Willow have already given the apples their seal of approval," she said.

Hank's eyes lit up. "The idea of experimenting with recipes again is mighty appealing."

Layla glanced down at the dogs. "I'm sure Billy Bob and Tink would be eager taste testers."

"Eager, yes. Discerning, not so much," Hank said, smiling fondly at them.

"If you're serious, the hotel has a commercial kitchen that's not being used for anything else. I'm not sure if the equipment is as good as the stuff you have in storage, but you're welcome to use it."

"You know what?" Hank said, stretching out the words into a drawl. "That sounds like a truckload of fun."

"And tasty for the rest of us, too," she said, excited for the possibilities. "I can show you where the apple trees are, and there's a golf cart you can use to bring the buckets back."

"Today?" Alberto asked, taking the apples from Hank and inspecting them.

She ran through her day's To Do List and mentally moved things around. "Sure. Now if you like."

Hank clapped his hands then rubbed them together. "Let's go."

*

Rhonda sat at her small, round dining table, looking out the front window, coffee in one hand, peanut butter toast in the other. Two men walked past, the one who might have been called Hank had their giant dog and the tubby black Labrador, and the other man had two buckets of apples. The one with the dogs looked up at her window and waved. She nodded back. They seemed nice enough, but not anyone she'd especially get along with. Too… cheerful.

Then she noticed Layla come into view, carrying an armful of dark fabric and a bag of apples, and Rhonda held her breath. Just one day free of interruptions would be bliss.

Sure enough, Layla let herself in the gate and headed for the front door. At the knock, Mr. Darcy woke and lifted his head. His gaze flicked from Rhonda to the door and back again.

"Your friend is here," she said to the greyhound. Mr. Darcy didn't get up, but, as ever, he seemed to take in everything. Always watching, always assessing. When she'd been

brushing her teeth last night, he'd sat at the open bathroom door, his chin dipped but looking at her intently. He wasn't a rush-in-ask-questions-later sort, not like those dogs in the other cabins. Mr. Darcy was sensible, and that was something, at least.

"Hello?" Layla called from the open doorway. It was open so Mr. Darcy could let himself in and out for toileting, but that did give a false sense of welcome to the other people. She'd need to rethink that.

Rhonda drew in a breath and stood. "Come in."

"Morning, Rhonda. I'm just dropping off some apples, if you'd like some," Layla said and handed the bag over.

"Thank you, that's very considerate." Rhonda took the apples and put them on the dining table. She always liked the crisp, tart apples that grew here. They were lovely at breakfast, cut in slices and sprinkled with a little salt.

"While I'm here—I found a raincoat in a box I was unpacking and thought it might fit Mr. Darcy." She gestured to the dog. "Do you mind if I try it on him?"

Rhonda sat down and picked up her toast again. "Of course not. He's your dog."

Layla crouched down to the greyhound's height and he stood, sniffed her hand, then her face.

"Hey there, you lovely boy," she said softly. "Would you like a raincoat to keep you nice and dry?" She carefully laid the coat over him and secured the Velcro tabs, then rubbed his ears as she looked it over. "You know that's a pretty good fit."

Rhonda took another bite of her toast. Something about Layla had been bothering her. Who would do this? Who would put their life on hold to set up a home for old dogs? It wasn't like it was her job. It made no sense at all.

Layla undid the Velcro and slid the coat off. "Will I leave this by the door or is there somewhere else I can put it for you?"

"There is fine," Rhonda said.

As Layla folded the coat, Rhonda watched her. She was young, probably in her twenties, and pretty enough, with shiny blonde hair that she seemed to always wear in a ponytail. Why wasn't she getting ready to start a family, or setting herself up in a career?

"Can I ask you something?" Rhonda said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Sure, ask away." She was running her fingers down either side of Mr. Darcy's spine and didn't even look up.

"Why are you doing this?" The words came out a little more abruptly than she'd intended, but she wouldn't be sorry for that.

Layla looked up, frowning. "Bringing you apples and a dog coat?"

"No, this," she said, making a sweeping gesture to the other cabins and the people outside. "Everything you're doing here in Applestead."

"I love dogs," Layla said simply and turned back to Mr. Darcy.

"Lots of people love dogs," Rhonda said. "But they don't give up their lives and move away from their social circle. Their family."

Layla flashed a self-deprecating smile. "I don't have much of a social circle." She blinked and looked away. "And my parents are dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Rhonda said and meant it. Grief was something she understood, and she didn't wish it on anyone. "But still," she persisted, "this is a big commitment. Why would a young woman, someone in the prime of her life, make those sacrifices and hide herself away in a little backwater town with a bunch of strangers? A bunch of *old* strangers. Human and beast alike."

"You're not strangers," Layla began, but then her expression changed and she said, "I want to do good in the world. I need to."

Rhonda was suddenly on full alert. Something in Layla's words, and the way she said

them, hinted that there was more to her story. And one thing Rhonda didn't trust was an unknown quantity. Was this entire set-up, this old dogs' home, some sort of scam? A long con?

Diane had two blind spots—her family and dogs. Her children took advantage of her all the time, and Diane allowed it, no matter what Rhonda said. It was one of the reasons Rhonda had insisted on paying rent all these years of living at Diane's house, despite Diane's offer of living there rent-free. Rhonda refused to be a freeloader. Another person taking advantage of Diane. And dogs? Once dogs were involved, Diane lost all common sense. Two days before Rhonda moved to Applestead, Diane had rushed out and found herself a monster of a dog called Persephone—one that was too big and too boisterous for her lifestyle. But Diane was plain oblivious when it came to dogs.

For an outsider like Layla, someone not in the family or a close friend, the only way to scam Diane would be to link it to dogs…

Plus, now she was dating Diane's grandson. Layla was getting her hooks into Diane's fortune via both the family and her dog. It was all too convenient.

"I'm sure you just have a big heart," she said to the younger woman. "But I want you to know that Diane is the only family I have. If you're using this place to hurt her in any way, I will stop you."

Layla held her gaze, steady and unflinching. "Noted. I'm glad Diane has good friends."

"Diane had a business with her son once," Rhonda said, leaning back in her chair. "Eddie's father, Mathew. It was Mathew's idea and she was supporting him by bankrolling it and going in as a partner. He lied about the financial reports, minimizing their income and spending the profits. Diane isn't stupid. She figured it out pretty quickly and dissolved the company on the spot." It had been one of the few times Diane had been able to see past her

blind spot about the family. “A friendly word of warning—if there’s anything not on the up and up here, get out now. Diane won’t be as gentle with someone who isn’t her own flesh and blood. You can bet she won’t leave it at just cancelling this deal.”

Layla shifted her weight to the other foot, but her voice was even as she said, “I’m honestly not trying to rip Diane off here. I just believe that everyone deserves a home where they’re safe and loved. Even dogs like Mr. Darcy.”

Rhonda watched her for a long moment, looking for a chink in the armor, but saw none. That didn’t mean all was safe, she’d just let it go for now and remain vigilant for Diane’s sake.

Layla stared at the dog for several beats before softly saying, “Would you like to know Mr. Darcy’s story?”

Rhonda glanced at the greyhound who lay on his bed, cautiously watching the humans. She couldn’t deny she’d occasionally been curious about this creature who was sharing her house. And the more she let Layla talk, the more chance she’d trip herself up. “Go on then.”

“He was bred by the racing industry, and after he stopped winning them money, his owner gave him away to someone who didn’t particularly want him and who eventually passed him on again. The new person kept him about a year, then advertised him free to a good home. Luckily, I saw the ad because dogs being given away for free sometimes end up in dangerous situations. So, besides a short time with his foster carer, he’s never had a real home, or someone to love him.”

An unexpected surge of emotion filled Rhonda’s chest. She blinked, refusing to let it take hold. “Thank you for telling me. And for the apples.”

“I just want you to understand why I’m doing this. Why it’s important. He’s the reason. And Billy Bob. And Goliath. And the others.”

Rhonda nodded and said, “Okay.” Maybe she’d misjudged this woman.

Layla smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “I need to deliver some apples to Valentina, but let me know if you need anything else.”

After Layla left, Rhonda sipped her coffee, but it had gone cold, so she took the mug and the rest of her toast to the kitchen and poured the brew down the sink. Mr. Darcy’s gaze tracked her every move.

She turned and leaned back on the counter, meeting the greyhound’s eyes. “I’m sorry you’ve had a crappy life. Sometimes I feel sorry for myself—well,” she admitted, “maybe more than sometimes. But I’ve had two families who loved me. My parents and then my husband and children. They might all be gone now, but you’ve never even had that.”

Mr. Darcy laid his pointy nose along his skinny front legs, but his gaze didn’t leave her face.

She felt compelled to do something for him, anything, so she looked around, her attention snagging on the corner of toast and peanut butter. She held it out and the dog sniffed the air, then slowly stood, stretched, and, step by agonising step, came to her. He reached out his long neck, and carefully, delicately, took the toast. He chewed, dropping a few crumbs, which inexplicably she didn’t mind. Then he took another step closer and leaned against her legs.

Rhonda’s heart missed a full beat. There was utter trust in the move. Trust in her. After all he’d been through, he was brave. Willing to risk his heart. Willing to be disappointed and let down again. She laid a hand on his head, stroking the soft, velvety fur, and his tail moved once from one side to the other.

“Okay, it’s a deal,” she said, her voice thick. “Toast for two next time.”

Mr. Darcy’s eyes closed and Rhonda felt a smile creep across her face.

*

That night, while Layla was curled up in bed reading with Doris and Zeb, her cell buzzed and Autumn's name flashed across the screen. She reached for it before it could go to voicemail.

"Hey," she said. "How's things?"

"I just wanted to check on Goliath," Autumn said, her voice hitching slightly. "I miss him."

Layla slotted a bookmark between the pages of her paperback and dropped it on her bedside table. "He's doing great. He and J.R. are buddies, and he's warming to Valentina. This morning, he even let her carry him without growling."

Autumn sighed. "I've already been replaced in his affections."

She was joking, but there was something under her tone that wasn't usually there, so Layla said, "You know it was your work that made him confident enough to bond with Valentina, right?"

"That's me. Heck of a gal."

They'd been friends for three years, long enough to hear what wasn't being said, and this conversation wasn't about Goliath. "Autumn, what's going on?"

"Nothing much. Hey, did you hear Jarrod's engaged?"

"Really?" She cast her mind back to the veterinarian at the clinic where she'd worked and tried to remember if he'd been dating anyone then. She hadn't paid much attention to the love lives of the other staff—she'd always had hermit tendencies—but she would have noticed a serious relationship like that. "I didn't know he was seeing someone."

"Janice," she said, voice flat.

Layla squinted at the ceiling as she tried to place the name but could only think of one Janice. "Receptionist Janice?"

"That's her."

"Really? There was never anything obvious between them." No secret smiles, private

touches, or familiarity in their interactions. She might not pay attention to discussions of love lives, but she noticed body language.

"Appearances can be deceiving," Autumn said, heavy on the attitude.

This entire conversation and its tone was weird for Autumn. Layla was clearly missing something big. "Okay, what gives? And don't fob me off, I can tell something's going on here."

There was a long pause, then a muffled curse before a sigh. "I've been dating Jarrod."

Layla frowned. "For how long?"

"Five and a half months."

It was said so quietly she wasn't even sure she'd heard correctly. "Five and a half *months*?"

"Yes."

Layla's jaw slackened. "I was still working there for most of that time. And even since I left we've been talking. How is it that you've been in a relationship that long and I didn't know?" Zeb lifted his head to check on her so she stroked a hand down his back to let him know she was okay, and he relaxed.

"I'm sorry." There was a world of pain in those two words. "I wanted to tell you, but Jarrod begged me to keep it all a secret from everyone, including you."

"Why would he say that?" She pictured bad things happening to Jarrod, starting with diseases of the genitals.

"He said that relationships that happen in the workplace are hard enough without everyone scrutinizing us all the time. The only fair shot we had at making it work was if no one else knew about it."

"There's some logic there, but still, keeping it from your own friend seems extreme. How long ago did you break up?"

"About three hours ago, when I heard Janice telling someone that she and Jarrod were engaged. It seems I wasn't the only work colleague he was telling to keep their relationship secret."

Autumn sounded so very tired and a little defeated. Layla wished she were closer so she could envelop Autumn in a hug and try to make the pain go away. "Do you want me to come out there?"

"No, you're needed there, and I didn't love him or anything tragic like that."

"Oh, sweetie," Layla said with a hitch in her voice, and Zeb crawled up beside her, lying as close as he possibly could, offering the comfort that only a warm dog could.

"Really, I'll be fine." Autumn made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a sniff. "I even made him call Janet in and tell her about us so that she had all the information before marrying him."

"Good for you."

"I'm glad Janet knows now, but I can't deny it was also pretty cathartic for me."

"Well, that's something. Still, henceforth he shall be known as Jarrod the Jerk," she said and was rewarded with a laugh that was only a little forced. "Tell me what I can do."

Autumn blew out a long breath. "Honestly, I want to forget about it for a few minutes at least. So tell me something to distract me."

"Well, I'm pretending to be dating Eddie."

"That's new," Autumn said, sounding almost like herself again. "How's it working out for you?"

"Honestly? Confusing."

"Trying to remember your cover story?"

"Trying to remember it's fake." She'd be embarrassed to admit that to anyone other than Autumn, and even now she cringed.

"Uh oh."

Layla scooted up in the bed a bit more to sit against the headboard. "It's just that sometimes when I'm with him, it feels like there's more."

"Maybe there is?"

"No, there can't be," she said, ignoring the voice of protest at the back of her mind. "I can't let it be more."

"Would it be so bad?" Autumn asked, her tone genuinely curious.

"He's leaving in three months, and I'm not setting myself up for a broken heart." She had a feeling that getting over Eddie wouldn't be an easy thing to do.

"Definitely leaving?"

"He was pretty adamant. He even brought it up again today—he asked if he could adopt Zeb and take him when he leaves." And his expression when he'd told the police chief that he was leaving hadn't allowed any room for negotiation. "I'm not even sure what he's running toward. He said something a while ago about having feelers out about jobs like park ranger and lighthouse keepers. Nothing specific."

"Maybe he's not running *toward* anything—just away from people. There's something to be said for a self-contained, independent person. They're pretty rare."

"That's true, but…" Eddie seemed to enjoy his interactions with the new residents of Applestead, and part of her hated to think of him and Willow alone somewhere. "Doesn't it sound lonely to you?"

"I don't know," Autumn said, her voice gloomy again. "Sometimes even when you're in a relationship it can be lonely."

Layla winced. Her job had been to distract her friend, but she'd brought the conversation back to the very topic they were supposed to be avoiding. "Have I mentioned I hate Jarrod?"

Autumn laughed. “Thank you. So explain to me why you’re in a fake relationship anyway?”

She heard the crinkle of a chocolate wrapper and honestly, she couldn’t blame her. This situation probably did require snacks to understand.

“It was his idea, to help get his grandmother off his back. She’s been giving him a fair amount of grief and he’s trying to do it without hurting her. He offered to help build fences and stuff for me for three months if I agreed.”

“His grandmother being Diane.”

“That’s the one. The woman I’m working hard to impress. If she finds out we’ve lied, she’ll forgive Eddie—he’s her favourite grandchild. Me, on the other hand, she’ll find harder to forgive.” And with what Rhonda had told her today about the business Diane had with Eddie’s father… she had no doubt Diane could be a hard ass when she wanted to be.

“Got it. Now take me back to the part where you’re trying to remember it’s not real.”

“He’s just…” She sighed and changed the cell to her other ear. “When he kissed me, the entire world faded away and I just wanted to melt into him and—”

“Wait,” Autumn said, her voice rising an octave. “When he *kissed* you?”

Layla bit down on a smile of guilty pleasure. “We were practicing being a couple. So people would believe us.”

“Did he seem into the kiss too?”

She closed her eyes, remembering the magical moments when his mouth had moved on hers, his arms had wrapped around her, his breath had become heavy as she’d touched him. “For about an instant I think he did. Then he kind of sobered up.”

“Are you sure there’s not something deeper going on?”

Eddie had left very little doubt when he’d pulled away and started talking about the mowing.

"We just believed our own spin there for a minute. But the lines are all clear again now."

"They don't sound clear. But I'll tell you what, you definitely distracted me, so job well done. Also, the irony. So strong it burns."

Layla frowned as she tried to keep up. "It does?"

"I've been in a relationship but was pretending to the world that I wasn't. You're not in a relationship but are pretending to the world that you are."

She was right. Layla huffed out a laugh, then snuggled down into the pillow and covered her eyes with her spare hand. "Autumn?"

"Yeah?"

"Tell me this will all work out okay?"

"This is all going to work out fine. Just don't fall for your own spin."

"Good advice," she said, snuggling back down under the covers. "Now let's talk about all the ways karma could deal with Jarrod."

Chapter Nine

Three days later, Eddie stood on the verge outside Layla's cabin just after breakfast and looked down the street to see if he could spot her. It was hard to believe that not long ago, he and Willow were the only ones in this town. Now, he'd already been stopped by Valentina, who was walking J.R. and Goliath and wanted to know about the wildflowers growing near the pond and waved as Alberto whizzed past on a golf cart. Even Willow's social circle had changed—when he'd found Layla wasn't at her cabin, Willow had asked to stay behind to hang out with Zeb. In some ways it was hard to even imagine what it had been like when Applestead had been empty.

And he wasn't sure how he felt about the change.

He headed down the street and saw Layla and Hank coming out of the hotel, deep in conversation. As he approached, Layla looked up and gave him a quick smile without missing a beat in whatever she was saying. She wore a white T-shirt knotted at the waist, faded black jeans, and well-loved sneakers with bright pink socks. He almost missed a step, and then tried hard not to betray that the sight of her left him slightly dazed.

When he was only a few steps away, he slowed. How should he greet her? Sometimes when they had an audience, they were able to get by without any fuss, especially if they'd seen each other a few times already in the day, but it was still early. Would onlookers expect more? And if his arms ached to hold her again, and he pulled her close, could he be certain he wasn't taking advantage of the situation?

As he reached her, he was saved from having to make a decision. She stood on tiptoes and kissed his cheek. To reach, she had pressed herself against his side and even though it was a fleeting second, his pulse spiked, and he expected he'd feel the imprint of her curves pressed against him for a long time to come.

"Morning," she said, apparently feeling much more unaffected than he was, because he couldn't get his throat to work at all.

To mask her effect on him, he knelt on one knee, bringing him to Billy Bob's height, and was rewarded with a giant tongue licking him up the side of the face. As the humans laughed, Eddie squeezed his eyes and mouth shut, then wiped his face on the sleeve of his shirt.

"No offence," he said to the big, blue Great Dane, "but I think I preferred Layla's kiss to yours."

Still wiping his face on his sleeve, he peered over at Layla. "I want to get started on painting the fences soon. There are three color options in the shed. If you get a chance, can you take a look and see if you like any of them?"

"Absolutely. When do you need to know?"

"Today would be great. I'm planning a trip into Larch Valley tomorrow to get a few supplies so if you don't like any of the colors, or you want more variety, I can grab some more paint then."

"That should be fine. In fact, I'd love to come with you. I haven't seen any of the

nearby towns yet."

Eddie smiled. The idea of a little time away, just the two of them, was enticing. "You bet."

"Do you mind if I look at the shed with you?" Hank asked. "Since we're getting the hotel kitchen going, I'd be interested to see what I could use to set up a garden. Alberto has a bright green thumb, so we may as well get him growing some vegetables, and make us a bit more self-reliant."

Layla's eyes lit up, and something twinged in his chest. A vegetable patch would take her one step closer to self-sufficiency, and take him one step closer to losing Applestead. But all he said was, "Not a problem."

"In the meantime," Layla said, "Hank and Alberto have made our very first batch of dog treats, using the apples we picked that day at the abandoned orchard."

The day they'd picked the apples had been the day they'd kissed. It had been in the name of practice, to make them more comfortable around each other, less reactive, but it hadn't given him any immunity—freezing up when she'd kissed his cheek just now was proof of that. All that day had done was given him a memory that kept playing whenever he let his guard down—when he was lost in work, or drifting off to sleep, he would be overcome with an immersive memory of kissing Layla.

He cleared his throat. "Glad the apples were useful."

Hank nodded and pushed his horn-rimmed glasses up his nose. "These have been given the seal of approval from Billy Bob and Tinkerbell. Mind you, neither of them is known for their discernment. They might have swallowed them whole without even tasting them."

Layla held up a treat. "So we're trying them out with the other dogs to see how popular they are. Want to come?"

She looked up at him, her blonde ponytail swishing, her face bright and happy, and he heard himself say, “Okay.”

He reached for her hand and she didn’t hesitate, her palm sliding against his, their fingers interlocking, his entire body buzzing from the connection, and he realized he might have a problem. They were fake dating. Layla was performing for their audience. He needed his brain cells to accept that, because his body sure wasn’t getting the message.

They passed his grandmother’s empty cabin and stopped behind Hank at number two. Rhonda stood at her front door in practical gray pants and an over-washed cardigan, Mr. Darcy by her side, both listening as Hank called out, explaining his mission. Rhonda came over to the fence, Mr. Darcy trailing a step behind, his short, black fur gleaming in the sun. She didn’t seem especially thrilled by the idea, but then Rhonda had never been the effusive sort. When he was twelve and his mother was moving him and Matt across the country to a place he wouldn’t know anyone, they’d stayed a last weekend with their grandmother. Matt had been thrilled, babbling away a mile a minute, bragging about their new life, answering their grandmother’s non-stop questions with enthusiasm. Rhonda had noticed how devastated Eddie was and asked him to help her get something from the kitchen. He’d followed, and instead, she’d sat him at the large table, and given him a plate with three of the special cookies that were never offered to the kids, and a glass of lemonade. She hadn’t hugged him or given him promises about how good his life would be. Instead she’d offered expensive cookies and a break from the pressure in the other room.

“You want him to be a test subject?” Rhonda said, the corners of her mouth downturned.

“No, no,” Hank said quickly. “Tinkerbell and Billy Bob have already tried them, and to be honest, I tried one too. All human grade ingredients, and all the apples were cored so no poisonous seeds in the batter. They’re one hundred percent safe.”

Rhonda shrugged her shoulder. “If you want. He’s Layla’s dog.”

Hank glanced Layla’s way as she nodded. There was something else going on here. He really should drop in on Rhonda for a coffee sometime and check she was okay.

Hank held a small biscuit over the fence to Mr. Darcy. The greyhound sniffed it, delicately took the treat, making eye contact with Hank as he did, then placed it on the ground. Eddie rubbed a hand over his chin to stifle a laugh.

“Did that fall out of his mouth?” Layla asked. “I mean, he has such a long snout, it’s hard to tell.”

She released Eddie’s hand—and he immediately missed the warmth—picked the treat up from the ground and offered it to the dog on her palm. Mr. Darcy carefully took the biscuit, and again placed it on the ground. This time he followed it up by walking away, across the yard and through the door.

“Right,” Hank said. “I think we can say that the apple and oat treats aren’t a hit with Mr. Darcy.”

“He likes peanut butter,” Rhonda said.

“He does?” Layla said, clearly surprised by the information. Though, maybe she was surprised that Rhonda knew it.

Rhonda nodded. “If you’re going to try another flavor, he likes peanut butter.”

“Noted,” Hank said. “Thanks.”

As Hank and Layla moved on along the row of cabins, Rhonda laid a hand on Eddie’s arm. “Do you have a minute?”

“Sure,” he said, digging his hands into his pockets.

They watched the retreating figures and Rhonda waited until they’d passed the empty cabin beside hers before turning back to him. He was patient enough to wait.

“There’s something I feel I need to say—” she paused, pulling the sides of her

cardigan closer "—but I don't want you to get upset."

Eddie held back a groan. He had a lot of time for Rhonda, but she'd been living with his grandmother for more years than he could remember. Perhaps it was inevitable that the interfering habit had rubbed off.

"If you need to introduce the topic like that," he said, "perhaps it's something that's better left alone." He didn't seriously expect her to drop it, but there was always a chance…

"I can see you're infatuated with Layla—"

Oh, Jesus, save me now.

"Rhonda, please," he said wincing.

"—but what do you really know about her?" Rhonda tipped up her chin, her blue-eyed gaze zeroed in on him.

He glanced up the road, hoping someone, anyone, would come by and rescue him. Ten minutes ago it'd seemed like there were people everywhere. "I know enough."

"She's come out of nowhere—"

"Pretty sure she came out of Boston." He dug his hands deeper into his pockets.

"Eddie, this is serious," Rhonda said, her brow furrowed. "She's come out of nowhere and suddenly she owns your family's holiday retreat."

"Gran would have checked her out," he said, scanning the street restlessly.

"You know as well as I do that your gran has a blind spot about family and about her dog. She can be impulsive about both."

He frowned. "Have you talked to her about Layla?"

Rhonda huffed. "She's just as infatuated with the idea of the old dogs' home as you are with Layla."

"I wouldn't say infatuated, exactly…" He shifted his weight.

"And that's another thing," Rhonda said pointedly. "Not only did she come out of

nowhere—"

"As I said, out of Boston."

"—and suddenly owns Applestead, now she's dating you, Diane's grandson."

He cocked his head to the side, processing the accusation. "You think Layla targeted me for my grandmother's money? That this is all, what? Some long con?" The idea was so laughable that he didn't know where to start. But, of course, he couldn't tell Rhonda that he'd been the one to suggest they fake a relationship and that Layla had taken a fair bit of convincing.

"I'm not saying she's doing anything wrong," she said, her tone saying the opposite. "I'm just asking you to keep your eyes open. Think things through."

Since Eddie wanted out of the conversation, and the easiest way was to placate her, he said, "Look, you're wrong about Layla, but I promise to keep my eyes open."

"That's all I ask." Rhonda nodded, and turned back to her cabin.

Eddie headed back up the road, wishing he'd thought fast enough to avoid that conversation altogether. He couldn't bring himself to be rude, though. Granted, Rhonda could come across as abrupt and even cold, but she was always looking out for his gran, and that's what her warnings today had been about. And Rhonda was right that his gran had blind spots about her family, including her dog. He trudged past Valentina's cabin, hearing the laughter from the treat testing spill out through the door, running the conversation with Rhonda back over in his head.

Okay, to be fair, she also had a point that he'd never heard of Layla before his gran had given her Applestead, but then, why would he have heard of her? He didn't live in his gran's pocket. Though, Rhonda did…

He reached his front door and speared his fingers through his hair. He'd been meaning to walk straight past and start the prep work for painting the fences, but instead found himself

heading inside and opening his laptop. He'd do a quick internet search so he could tell Rhonda that it was all fine. And allay that small voice at the back of his mind that was saying if it seems too good to be true, it probably is…

*

An hour later, Eddie's head was spinning. He'd searched for Layla on the web and found very little. Too little for his comfort. All he knew was that he had to go straight to the source. He headed to Layla's cabin and knocked on the open door. She sat at the dining table, her chin in one hand, writing something down with the other. Zeb and Willow were curled together on a bed across the room, and Doris on another at Layla's feet. Willow noticed him and rushed over, wagging hard, eyes squinting in delight, giving him her best Dalmatian smile. Other people could sneak up on her, but she always smelt him. He crouched to greet her as Layla leaned back in her chair, rolling her shoulders. He tried not to notice how her white T-shirt stretched across her chest with the movement—he needed to stay focused on what he'd come to say.

"Hey, Eddie." She smiled. "I'm just finishing the supplies list for the trip to Larch Valley tomorrow. I've checked in with everyone else and added requests to the master list—mainly food, dog food, and toiletries. Anything you want added?"

"Nope. I'm all good," he said, not even trying to match her breezy tone.

"Is everything alright?" A fleeting frown passed across her face. "You look… tense."

He stood and Willow returned to Zeb. "I have a question."

"You'd better ask it then." She reached for her coffee mug, took a sip, then cradled it between her hands, giving him all her attention.

He hooked his thumbs in his jeans' belt loops and chose his words carefully. "Is there any reason that you have no internet footprint before about six years ago?"

Layla snapped to attention. "You googled me?"

"It's not that out of order." He refused to feel bad about it. "You're acquiring a town, one that's been in my family for my entire life. It's probably more of a surprise that I didn't google you before now."

A barely perceptible tremor ran through her. "If it's not out of order, why does it feel like an invasion of privacy?"

Privacy? He hadn't broken any laws or looked anyplace illegal. He'd done a basic web search, and refused to feel bad about that. "I looked at publicly available information. How is that an issue?"

She plopped the mug on the table and rose to her feet, a line forming between her brows. "I haven't asked you why your family all think you need a keeper, or to search for that information on the web. I just assumed that was your business."

"That's different," he said, trying not to bristle. "You know my grandmother and you're literally living in a piece of my family's history. You, on the other hand, are a complete mystery." He crossed his arms over his chest as he brought the focus back to her. He might have been uncertain when Rhonda first suggested he keep an eye out, but now he was grateful she'd planted the seed. "I found lots of Layla Crosses, some from interstate, some overseas, some young, some old. But none of them were you, except for a few random things from the last few years. I find that strange."

"Lots of people only leave a light footprint." She crossed her arms tightly under her breasts, her lips flattened. "I think the bigger issue here is that you're angry with me for having Applestead. I'm sorry that Diane giving this place to me has robbed you of a family inheritance—I didn't realize that at the time."

"I don't care about the money." He never had, not like his brother. "Money's just money."

She snorted. "Spoken like a person who never had to worry about not having enough

of it."

"My family is rich, not me." It was something people had confused all his life. He was financially comfortable, but it was his grandmother and parents who had the money. He'd grown up in big houses, yes, but he'd lived off his own income since the day he'd left high school. He was hardly rolling in it. "I don't even have a job right now."

"Yet you walk in here criticizing me. At least I'm trying. I'm trying to build something."

He watched her for a beat—her closed stance, the shuttered face told him there was more that wasn't being said. And he realized they were beside an open door. He flicked it closed then turned back to her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You've been holed up here in this town, keeping yourself separate from everyone and everything. What's your plan after you leave, Eddie?" She arched one eyebrow. "Find somewhere else to hide?"

"I don't hide," he said.

Zeb stood and padded over to sit beside Layla. She laid a reassuring hand on his fluffy, black and white head as she said, "Well, I don't see you settling down anywhere. Making a commitment to a place."

"I commit when I need to." Hell, he'd had a career in the army, and that was an institution that was all about committing to a group, a goal, and a plan.

"Wasn't the job here at Applestead about avoiding connections with people?"

"That's a rotten thing to say. You're making it sound like my life has no meaning because it doesn't fit your idea of what it should be." He wrapped a hand around the back of his neck. Somewhere along the way, this conversation had changed course. They'd started talking about her, but now the focus was on him. Even Zeb was concerned, and Willow was watching the three of them from across the room.

"Seems to me," Layla said calmly, "you've been here, away from your family or any sense of community with other people. And you're planning on doing the same when you leave after our agreement is up."

"I like being alone. Living life my own way." How was that suddenly a crime? "Even if I was avoiding connecting with people, which I'm not, what business is it of yours?"

She glared. "Asks the man who turned up here to interrogate me after a stealth investigation."

"There was no stealth," he said, enunciating each word. "It was all information on the public record. On the web for anyone to see."

"And if you're fine with that, then you won't mind answering a couple of questions about yourself as well. So, tell me something. You had countless advantages in life and clearly have potential. And you're not doing anything in return. Trying to make the world a better place, or even trying to do something with your life. What's up with that?"

What's up with that? What did that even mean? He squared his shoulders. "What exactly is wrong with the way I live my life?"

She shook her head slowly, her blonde ponytail swishing. "You can't live your whole life floating around like a leaf on the wind. You have to put down roots sometime."

"Why?" He threw his hands out, palms up.

"Because if you don't, you'll wake up one day and it will be too late and you'll have no real relationships, no ties to anyone or anything." Her voice didn't get louder—she was too good with the dogs to let that happen—but there was an edge of intensity that had as much effect.

"That's ridiculous," he said, ignoring that her accusation made his skin itch. "I have ties."

"If you're not hiding from the world, tell me about the networks you're plugged into."

Her pale green eyes sparked. “Or even a purpose or meaning you’re heading toward.”

He dismissed that with a flick of his hand. “I don’t need some big purpose.”

“Do you even know what makes you happy? What you want?”

Want? Her cheeks were flushed, her lips slightly parted, her chest rising and falling, and she asked him if he knew what he wanted? His heart thudded against his ribs. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

“Prove it.” She tipped up her chin. “Name something.”

“What?” he said as the cabin walls closed in. The air was thicker, making it hard to fill his lungs. He’d never wanted to kiss anyone more.

“Do it now. Tell me a hope you have, or a dream you want to achieve.”

She was pushing, but there was no awareness behind her eyes—her thoughts were not following the same path as his. Which made sense. They were only fake dating, so there was no reason she’d be thinking about kissing him just because he was. At least one of them had held onto their wits.

“Layla,” he rasped, then swallowed hard to get his voice to work. “I don’t need to prove anything—”

“Go on. Do it.”

He shook his head sharply. She really didn’t want to know what he was thinking.

“What’s stopping you? Just think about what you’d wish for, make a plan to achieve it, and then get on with it.”

His hands trembled at his sides. “It’s not always the right thing to do.”

“I don’t understand you. Why do you hold yourself back?”

He stifled a groan. She was going to kill him. “Sometimes it’s wiser.” And he really needed to be wise in this situation, or things were going to spiral out of control, and the carefully constructed boundaries around their fake relationship would be blown away.

"Then you're just hiding. Avoiding." She leaned forward. "Seriously, Eddie, reach for what you want."

He drew in an uneven breath and something changed in her gaze, as if she finally caught the undercurrent, and he stilled, not sure whether he wanted her to be sensible and turn away, or…

Her tongue darted out and moistened her lips and his blood turned to fire.

Eddie took a step closer and reached for what he wanted.

She met him halfway, standing on tiptoes, and the moment her soft lips landed on his, his heart missed a full beat. It began as a light caress, changed to warm pressure, and then her mouth opened and he slid his tongue inside, and in that instant she became the center of his universe. Her scent surrounded him, the soft noise she made at the back of her throat travelled through to his bones. This was nothing like the first time they'd kissed—that had been about discovery and breathless wonder. This kiss was different. It was all fire and hunger and urgency. He wrapped an arm around her back, pulling her closer, their bodies pushed hard, and it still wasn't close enough.

"Layla," he rasped against her mouth.

"I know," she said, then pulled at his shirt, freeing it from the waistband of his jeans, her fingers straining. As she finally made contact, her palms both soothed and burned his skin, and she pushed them farther, up the planes of his back, restricted by his shirt, but then he pulled it over his head, and her hands spread, and her fingers dug hard and he almost combusted on the spot.

He grasped her shirt to do the same, but a little bit of oxygen reached his brain, and he wrenched his mouth away, his breathing ragged, and leaned his forehead on hers. "What are we doing?"

"Whatever we want." She placed a trembling hand over the rapid rise and fall of his

chest. “What do you want, Eddie?”

A shudder ripped through his body. “You,” he said and kissed her again. “Just you.”

There was no point denying it anymore, or attributing it to confusion around the roles they’d been playing. He’d been lying awake at night in the cabin beside hers, thinking about her, wishing she was beside him, dying to kiss her again.

Layla leaned back in his arms. The distance was the sweetest of tortures but her hand on his chest remained firm so he waited.

“Say that again.” She pulled her bottom lip into her mouth and bit down on her smile.

“I need you. So much I can’t see straight.” He ran his fingertips down her arms, feeling the shiver that raced across her skin. “What do you want?”

A strong pulse beat at the base of her throat, and, mesmerized, he dipped his head to place a feather-light kiss at the spot. She arched her neck back, and hissed out a breath.

He pulled himself back to find her eyes and cupped the side of her face. “Layla?”

If she stopped them now, if she didn’t want him as desperately, he’d be devastated. He watched her beautiful face, barely daring to move.

She dropped the hand from his chest and laced their fingers together. “I want to take you through that door to where my bed is waiting for us, and I want us to not have to stop this time.”

His knees wobbled with the relief that flooded his body as a slow smile spread across his face.

“That’s something I can promise,” he said, and followed her into her bedroom.

*

She wasn’t sure how long she laid there in his arms, maybe forever, maybe no time at all, before there was a knock at the front door.

Eddie groaned and put an arm up over his eyes. “And that’s another problem with

living near people. No privacy."

"Stay here and I'll get rid of them," she said, then hesitated. "You know, this is the one thing we don't have to hide. We've been telling everyone we're dating. They'll expect that we've been sleeping together. We don't have to pretend."

Eddie ran a hand up her back, a lazy smile spreading across his face. "Get rid of them anyway."

Shivers ran across her skin. "On it."

Another knock at the door sounded, and she called, "Coming!"

She slid out of bed and grabbed her clothes, shoving her legs through her jeans and throwing on a sweater, not bothering with underwear. "Don't move," she said as she closed the bedroom door behind her.

She walked past Doris in her little bed, and Zeb and Willow, curled up together on one larger dog mattress. Zeb's black nose pointed at the door, his ears swiveled to the front.

"You know, Zeb, if I could teach you to open the front door, you could be doing this."

Zeb stood, head cocked to the side.

She rubbed his fuzzy ears on the way past. "Sorry, I should have known you'd try to work out what that instruction was."

There was another knock at the door just as she reached for the doorknob. Despite the insistent knocking and the bad timing, she dredged up a smile because a leader didn't get the luxury of being cranky.

She pulled the door open and her smile dropped. Along with her stomach.

"You have got to be kidding me."

The man standing before her was thinner than she'd last seen him, and looked about fifteen years older even though it had only been eight years, but it was most definitely her father. The father who was supposed to be in jail. The father she'd told everyone in

Applestead, including Eddie, was dead.

"Good to see you, Baby Girl," he said brightly. "I need you to hide me."

Layla gripped the doorframe and tried very hard not to fall apart.

Chapter Ten

Layla pinched the bridge of her nose, closed her eyes and began counting backwards from ten. This couldn't be happening. Not now.

The best answer was that it wasn't happening. She'd slept with Eddie, fallen into a blissful slumber, and was dreaming…

She opened her eyes again to find that her father was still there. The stubble on his chin was grayer, but his ears stuck out from under an Atlanta Braves baseball cap in a way that was so familiar that her shoulders slumped. This was indeed happening.

"Layla? Sweetheart, are you okay?" His sandy blond eyebrows swooped down.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in a stage whisper. Within an instant, Zeb was at her side, close, body alert, gaze locked on the intruder.

Her father's green eyes brightened as he reached out to pat Zeb. "Hello, there. What's your name?"

Zeb let out a soft, low growl and her father snatched his fingers back.

"I asked what you're doing here," Layla repeated.

He opened his mouth, clearly ready to launch into one of his trademark stories, but before he could reply, she held up a finger. “You know what? It doesn’t even matter,” she said, still in the fierce whisper. “All that matters is that you can’t be here.”

His cheerful expression fell. “Your new friends don’t know your dad was in jail, do they?”

Jail? She snorted. “They don’t even know you’re alive.”

He winced, then nodded. “I suppose I deserve that. But here’s the thing, I need—”

Suddenly, he stopped, looking over her shoulder.

Layla’s heart froze and she turned to see Eddie coming out of the bedroom. He was dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt, not at all like he’d been less than an hour earlier as she’d been tearing at his clothes. Her skin thrummed at the memory.

Zeb’s gaze flicked to Eddie then back to her father, and he let out a soft, low growl.

She had Zeb on one side, Eddie on the other, and her father in front of her. And she was still too stuck in the afterglow of sleeping with Eddie to get her brain to work properly. But she had to say something. Explain…

“Er, Eddie, this is…”

“Bud,” her father said, sticking out his hand. “Buddy.”

“Buddy,” she repeated faintly as Eddie shook the proffered hand once.

“Buddy Prince,” her father—Tom Landingham to his friends, family, and the Georgia Justice System—said.

“Eddie Fitzpatrick.” Eddie’s hands were planted low on his hips. “How do you know Layla?” His voice was pleasant enough, but it had a thread of steel. He’d been here alone, caretaker of the town for long enough that his instinct to challenge a newcomer wasn’t surprising. She needed a story fast.

“We worked together a few years ago,” she said.

"That's right," her father supplied, removing the cap and scratching the top of his head. "At the ice-skating rink."

Eddie glanced at her, eyebrows raised.

"Yes, the ice-skating rink. Such fun. Hey, Eddie, don't let me hold you up. Bud and I have some reminiscing to do. I'll touch base with you later?"

"Sure." Eddie looked between them one last time then said with heavy meaning, "I'll leave Willow and catch you later, Layla."

She understood. Leaving Willow meant that Zeb would stay, and he wasn't leaving her alone with a stranger. Eddie looked at her again, his dark brown eyes narrowing a touch. How did you say goodbye to your fake boyfriend after you slept with him in reality? Especially with a stranger standing there.

Eddie saved her. He leaned forward and brushed his lips across her cheek. "I'll have my phone on me. If you need me just call."

He bent to ruffle the fur on Zeb's head. "You're in charge, Zebadiah."

Eddie stepped past her father on his way out the door. Once he was out of earshot, she turned back to her father, and in a stage whisper said, "If you—"

He cut her off. "Maybe I should come inside for this conversation?"

Letting him in would make it harder to get him to leave, but he was right—they shouldn't have this conversation where other people could watch them. So she stood back to let him pass, then closed the door behind them.

"It's wonderful to see you, Baby Girl." He opened his arms for a hug.

"Do not call me that." She took a step back. "And you need to go."

He dropped his arms, and his face was suddenly serious. "Layla, I need to hide. And you're the best person I know so I came to you."

"Hide from who?" she asked warily. She had a lot of people and dogs to protect here,

and no idea what her father was mixed up in.

He threw out his palms as if the answer was obvious. “Your mother.”

“She’s out of jail too?” She swallowed. This was getting better and better.

“Only recently. I’ve been out almost a year.”

A year? She’d really stopped paying attention. “You got out early?”

“For good behavior.”

Of course. Her father had a remarkable ability to adjust to any setting. It made him an excellent salesman, and a skilled fraudster. It totally stood to reason that he would conform in jail and be a model prisoner.

She crossed her arms tightly. “Let’s start with why you’re hiding from your wife.”

“She’s not my wife. I filed for divorce not long after sentencing. I’m officially free from prison and my marriage.”

Huh. She was a child of divorced parents. “You know what I meant. Why are you hiding from your ex-wife?”

“In jail, I had some therapy and realized I can’t say no to your mother.” He looked down at the floor sheepishly. “She gets all these ridiculous plans and I go along against my better judgement.”

That did make sense—during her childhood, her mother had always been the ringleader of schemes, and Layla and her father had followed obediently along behind. Her favorite memories were from when her mother was out and her dad took her to the park to play with other people’s dogs—that was when she’d known she’d wanted to work with dogs when she grew up. But in the end he’d made his choices, and he could live with the consequences. “So tell her to stop involving you.”

“That’s the point.” He sighed melodramatically. “I can’t. She’ll be my downfall, sweetie, and the only way to protect myself is to stay away altogether.” He hit her with his

puppy dog eyes. “The only option I had was to come to you.”

She glanced out her front window, watching Alberto slowly cross the park with Billy Bob and Tinkerbell. As she turned back to her father, away from the view of her little town, something occurred to her. “How *did* you come to me?”

He shrugged. “One of my new friends from jail. Four-fingered Bernie. He said he’d find you for one hundred bucks, and here I am. You have to keep me safe. Also, can you lend me one hundred dollars?”

Layla groaned and dropped her head into her hands. She was sorry she’d asked. But she was certain about one thing. “You can’t stay here. This is the way I’m making amends for what you and Mom did.”

“Great,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “I’ll make amends too. What exactly do you do here?”

“It’s a senior dog sanctuary.”

“Perfect. Dogs love me.”

“Yeah, you might want to ask Zeb about that,” she muttered, and Zeb cut her a quick glance from his position as sentry at her side.

“Please, sweetheart. Just for a few days?”

Heaviness dragged at her heart and a depressing certainty grew that disaster was looming. She was backed into a corner. How could she compromise her plans for the sanctuary by risking being caught out in a lie, or people knowing her family’s past? Yet how could she turn her father away? What other option was there? Deep down, she knew she couldn’t send him packing when he needed help, but it still grated that he was putting her in the position where she’d have to.

“I know I’m going to regret this. You can stay in my spare bedroom, just for a week or two. But while you’re here, I am not letting you out of my sight. That means no wandering

off, no telling people you're my father or anything about me. And no getting too settled."

He leapt toward her and dragged her into a bear hug. "Thank you, Baby! This will be great."

Layla disentangled herself and led him to the spare bedroom. Now he knew he could stay he was chattering away as though there was nothing wrong. As though everything was normal. As though he was a welcome guest in her home. She rubbed her temples to ward off the headache she could already feel forming.

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Early the next morning, Eddie set off for Larch Valley, his car full of humans and dogs. Layla, uncharacteristically restless and fidgeting with her seat belt, was in the front passenger seat, her denim cut-offs framing well-defined legs. Her friend Buddy was in the back with Doris on his lap, and Willow and Zeb had curled up together on the rest of the back seat.

There was something strange about the new guy. He whistled a lot and seemed extra pleased to be coming with them today. And there was definitely something strange about Layla's reactions to Bud. She never let him get farther than five feet away from her, and had insisted he accompany them on the supply run despite Buddy saying he was willing to stay behind.

No doubt about it, they were definitely more than former colleagues from a skating rink…

Eddie sighed and switched on the radio. This random man was not his problem. In two months' time, he and Willow would be driving out of Applestead, and leaving all this behind for good. Zeb would be with them too, if he could convince Layla to part with the border collie. A group of country music voices on the stereo sang about heartache and Eddie tried hard to focus on it. Instead, he kept sneaking glances in the rear-view mirror at the man on the backseat of his Jeep. Granted, it wasn't his problem, but whatever was off about the

guy was niggling at him.

"So, Bud," he said casually, "how did you and Layla meet?"

"The ice-skating rink downtown," he said without hesitation. "It was a lovely old place—stars painted on the ceiling and polished wood seats."

The same story as yesterday. Not that he believed it more now than when he'd heard it then. He turned to Layla. "This was before you became a veterinary nurse?"

"I worked there on summer break during high school." Her voice was tight, and a note higher than normal.

Eddie nodded. "Great that you were able to keep in touch with an adult you worked with over summer when you were in high school."

"It is," said Bud loudly from the back seat. "Hey, tell me more about Doris here. I'm half in love with her already."

Layla half turned in her seat. "She lived with a couple, who claimed to love her like their own baby. Until they had a baby. Then they didn't want Doris anymore."

"Oh, sweetheart," Bud said to the girl on his lap. "Though, to be fair, newborns can be a handful, and Doris has special needs."

"Not then, she didn't," Layla said, flinching at the memory. "Her owners were clients at our clinic and our number was on her collar tag in case of emergencies. We started getting regular calls when people found her roaming the neighbourhood. Before the baby her owners used to dress Doris up in cute outfits and were always posting her photo to social media. After the baby, they were annoyed when we'd call to say we'd been notified she was on the streets. And then she was hit by a car, which was when she arrived at our clinic. I called and her owner said, and I quote, 'it serves her right.' She went on to say they'd been meaning to get her put to sleep so just do it now."

"Their own dog?" Bud said, outraged.

Eddie was momentarily shocked out of his observation of the new guy. “People never fail to disappoint me,” he murmured, glancing at the sweet dog in the back.

“I asked if I could take her into the rescue, and they agreed. Doris was taken straight into emergency surgery. She came through like a superstar but she didn’t regain the use of her back legs.”

“Don’t you worry, my love,” Bud cooed beside her ridiculously long ears. “You’re one of Layla’s dogs now. Like family. And Layla would never turn her back on family.” Doris licked his chin.

“So, Eddie,” Layla said brightly. “Where are we going today?”

Eddie sighed and allowed Layla to change the subject again. He mentioned the stores they’d be stopping at, but his mind wasn’t as easily diverted.

Layla and Bud were lying, clearly. But why? And how much were they lying about? He had a bad feeling that it was connected to the missing years of Layla’s internet presence. And that wasn’t the only thing bothering him. When Bud didn’t think anyone was watching, he’d shoot Eddie a look of suspicion. Given Bud was the one lying through his teeth, why was the older guy suspicious of him?

Nothing about this situation was right.

And Eddie couldn’t help but think that maybe Rhonda was onto something. Maybe there was more to Layla’s story than she was letting on…

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Layla was ready to murder her father. When Eddie had ducked into the hardware store, her father grabbed her arm from the back seat and whispered, “How well do you know this man?”

“Well enough,” she said as she pulled her arm free.

He sniffed. “I’m not sure if I approve of him.”

"I'm not sure that matters." She wrenched open the door and stepped out of the Jeep.

I'm not sure if I approve of him? She rolled her eyes and headed into the hardware store. He thought after everything he'd put her through, he still had some authority over her?

She found Eddie standing in front of a display of paintbrushes, with a handful of items and a tin of paint.

"You okay?" he asked when he spotted her. "You look annoyed."

Of course, that was because she was annoyed, but admitting that would mean explaining more than she could about the man back in the car, so she shook her head. "Just scanning the aisle, looking for you. Hey, let me take those things for you."

Seemingly satisfied with that answer, he handed her three packets of nails and asked her to grab a large paintbrush from a nearby stand.

After the hardware store, they made their way through the list of errands and then stopped at a park to let the dogs stretch their legs. Zeb and Willow sniffed their way around the trees and her father carried Doris over to relive herself. The whole time, Eddie and her father were surreptitiously watching each other. Practically circling each other, armed with narrowed gazes and stealthy frowns.

"Dad," she said sternly, when Eddie had followed Willow and Zeb around the park. "Knock it off."

He flashed her a bright, shiny smile. "Knock what off, Baby Girl?"

"You know what. You shouldn't be here at all, and yet you're sticking your nose in my life."

He shrugged. "He's not good enough for you."

Layla looked up at the sky and prayed for strength. Her father wanted to parent her now? Just show up after all these years, ask her to hide him then expect to have a say in her life.

"I'm serious," she said. "Let it go."

He just smiled and walked Doris over to another tree. Then, when they stopped at another part of town so Eddie could grab some gardening supplies, her father disappeared into a thrift store and emerged with a secondhand stroller. "For Doris," he said and loaded it into the back of the Jeep. The ice around her heart melted a little, but as soon as they started the drive home again, he opened his mouth and she was back wanting to murder him again.

"Eddie," he said, "how long have you and Layla been together?"

Eddie shot her a quick look, his dark blue eyes sparking. "A few weeks."

"Huh," he said, heavy with meaning. Then he started talking softly to Doris.

"You got a problem with that?" Eddie said.

"Nope, not me." Her father's tone was all good-natured charm. "Though, I do wonder… You seem very serious for only knowing each other a few weeks."

"Any business of yours?" Eddie asked mildly, but the gaze he sent through the rear-view mirror was pointed.

"Goodness, no," he said on a fake laugh. "Absolutely none at all."

Layla rolled her eyes. These two men would be the death of her.

She pasted a smile on her face and said, "Eddie, what are your next plans for Applestead?"

He rubbed one hand over his stubbled chin while the other held the wheel. "I was going to ask you about that. I've already made inroads on the grooming station in the hotel laundry, so what do you want me to focus on after it's done?"

"I have a thought, but no idea if it's feasible." She left the unspoken 'in the time before you leave' hang in the air.

"May as well ask," he said, shrugging one strong shoulder.

"Since all the dogs are seniors, and not all of them can walk far enough to get mental

stimulation, I thought it would be great if we built a sensory garden."

He smoothly changed lanes to overtake an old pick up. "What would that entail?"

"They're amazing," she said, turning in her seat to face him. "It's like building an area that gives them some mental stimulation. Some interesting things to sniff, like scented plants. Maybe a shallow pond to step in, and a sand pit for digging."

"Like a dog playground?" He threw her a quick glance and then turned back to the road.

"Exactly. If they were younger, they could go for long walks. This gives them enough enrichment even on short walks."

He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and nodded. "Maybe some play equipment too? Tunnels and things to climb. If I fence it, we could let them off leash to just explore."

That was more sophisticated than she'd been hoping for, but it sounded amazing. He looked over again and they shared a smile. It was such a pleasure to be in sync with him again that she reached out and placed a hand over his thigh. The muscles bunched and released under her fingers as he changed gears, and her skin grew warm.

"I can help," her father said from the backseat. "I'd love to build something for the dogs."

For a brief moment she'd almost forgotten he was there. Reluctantly, she withdrew her hand from Eddie's thigh, and was about to point out to her father that he'd never done a day's manual labor in his life when Eddie's cell buzzed.

He glanced at the screen. "Do you mind if I take this?"

"Not at all." A moment to compose herself was just what she needed anyway.

He hit a button and answered over the car speakers. "Hi Caroline. How are things?"

"As good as can be expected." The woman's voice sounded tired. "I just wanted to let

you know that I need to go away in a few weeks' time, and I'll be taking Jonathon to Boston to stay with my parents for a few days. I thought you might like to visit him there."

"Why not leave Jonathon with me?"

Layla stilled. Wasn't Jonathon a kid? He wanted to bring a kid to Applestead for an extended visit?

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," the other woman said. "You know I don't like the idea of him being in a ghost town with just you. What if something goes wrong? It's so deserted and, to be honest, a little bit spooky."

He grinned broadly. "Great news. It's not deserted anymore. There's a bunch of people living here, and lots of dogs. Jonathon will love it."

The hesitation on the other end of the line was heavy. "I don't know, Eddie—"

"Plus, I'm in a serious relationship now. Her name's Layla. You and Jonathon will love her."

Layla flinched. This was getting worse. She waved to get Eddie's attention. The last thing she needed was a kid in Applestead. Someone else to be responsible for. She'd have to manage the dogs more tightly—keep Goliath away from him for the kid's sake, and Mr. Darcy away for Mr. Darcy's sake. And that was if the other dogs were on best behavior. Had little Burrito's previous family said he was bitey? And, oh God, Billy Bob. He'd knock a kid to the ground by turning and not even realize. She tried again to get Eddie's attention, but he was all eyes on the road and all attention on the call. The sanctuary just wasn't set up for kids. Everything had been made for the dogs' needs.

When he ended the call, she said, "This is a bad idea."

Eddie tipped his chin to the back seat. "How about we talk about this when we get back. After the town dinner tonight, you could come over to my place?"

"Don't mind me!" her father said. "Just pretend I'm not even here."

"I'd love to," Layla said, turning in her seat to glare at Bud.

"I'm sure you'd just be bored, anyway, Bud," Eddie said. "We'll talk about something more interesting for now instead. Layla, any other ideas for the dog playground?"

With effort, Layla brought her attention away from the twin distractions of wanting to physically maim her father, and Eddie's plan of bringing a child into her senior dog sanctuary, and instead began discussing the finer points of the ideal adventure ground for her dogs.

Chapter Eleven

Layla stood in the dining hall of The Applestead Hotel, looking around at the various human and canine residents, and allowed herself a smile. Things for the sanctuary were still uncertain with the trial phase deadline hanging over her head, but this was the first time all

the carers were in one place together and warm satisfaction filled her chest. Twelve months ago, she wouldn't have been able to imagine this—setting up a senior dog sanctuary in their own little town. And here they were…

Nell was fussing over Tinkerbell, cooing in a high-pitched voice, and Tink was lapping it up. Billy Bob roamed, using his Great Dane height to best effect by checking people's hands and pockets for random treats.

Her father had wheeled Doris into the room in her new stroller, creating a stir, and was now showing the stroller off to Valentina. Eddie was over in a corner, fluffing up the large bed he'd brought for Zeb and Willow and settling them on it. Rhonda sat at the long metal table, Mr. Darcy leaning against her knees, both of them watching the movement around the room with wary eyes. She laid a hand on his bony shoulders and he leaned harder into her. Hank and Alberto were in the kitchen, calling out to each other about what they were doing, in an entertaining show that clearly reflected their time running a diner.

"Order up," Hank called, and less than a minute later, Alberto emerged through the swinging doors, carrying four plates.

"Everyone take a seat." Alberto laid a plate in front of Rhonda, then the places either side. "For appetizer, we have Hank's own recipe for apple and potato fritters with homemade relish."

The smell in the air was delicious—light and fragrant, sweet and savory—and Layla practically swooned. Obviously, the others agreed, because within moments, all humans were seated and several dogs were lingering in case they were offered a plate.

Eddie slid into the chair beside her, dropping a casual kiss on her cheek before picking up his cutlery. Her pulse stuttered but she tried to keep the easy smile on her face. Of course, she didn't have to hide the way her fake boyfriend affected her, but their cover story was that their relationship was in a comfortable place, not this early-days jumpiness she felt.

And that the feeling was mutual. If she let everyone see just how much Eddie affected her, and they noticed that he seemed unaffected in contrast, it would make their relationship look weird. Balance was the key. Finding that balance was the challenge.

"We still on for that conversation after dinner?" His smile was easy but his gaze pinned her.

"I'll be there." She just had to decide how much to tell him. What she had to disclose and how much she could keep to herself. Again, balance was the key.

Hank emerged with another four plates, and then took a seat. "Before we start," he said, "since this is the first time we've all been together in one place, I'd like to make a toast to the person who made all this possible." He raised his water glass to her.

The constant anxiety in her belly about the sanctuary squirmed to life. "I haven't made it possible yet. We're still in the trial phase."

"Nonsense," Valentina said. "You pulled this whole thing together and that deserves acknowledgement."

"To Layla," Nell said.

Assorted glasses filled with water, soda, or wine, were all lifted in unison. "To Layla," the others chorused, her father the loudest voice of all. Even Rhonda looked half convincing.

Hank made a flourish with his hand. "Now dig in before it gets cold."

She only had one mouthful when something brushed her leg under the table, and Layla dipped her head to peek. Despite her chonky Labrador frame, Tinkerbell was moving from person to person, scanning laps for crumbs, bumping the table legs as she went, laying her muzzle on the occasional thigh, begging for scraps. Most of the people were ignoring her, but a hand appeared at Alberto's chair with a piece of fritter and Tink did a quick U-turn and gobbled it up. Stifling a smile, Layla sat back up.

"These are excellent fritters," her father said, one hand still on the sleeping Doris's stroller, rocking it gently.

Alberto smiled across at his partner. "Hank can make anything taste good. Wait until you see what he's done with the baked apples for dessert."

Hank tilted his head in a surprisingly bashful gesture, then turned to her. "Layla, tell us about your plans. We all know there is a trial phase we have to get through, but then what?"

Layla put her fork down. She'd hoped for a chance to discuss the sanctuary's future tonight. "We have six months to show we can make this work and become self-sufficient. And until then, I'm not taking on more dogs—we're just setting up with who's here already."

"In case we fail," Valentina supplied, looking around at the group.

Layla shrugged. "Basically, yes. If we don't make it, these current dogs will be simply reabsorbed back into our foster network. But if we take on a bunch of new dogs and the sanctuary fails, then we might not have foster homes for them." Her stomach cramped tight. It would be bad enough letting these people down, but taking on more dogs without a Plan B would be reprehensible.

Nell tapped her cheek with a finger. "Okay, then how do we make sure we don't fail?"

Layla had asked herself the same question a million times, hoping she could find a secret trick, a sure-fire way to secure success, but all she'd come up with were the same basic two parts.

"Some of it is seeing if this model works—a senior dog sanctuary in its own village. Strangers pulling together and prioritizing the dogs."

"It's early days," Nell said, "but I think that aspect is working."

Layla shot her a grateful smile. "But the larger part is financial sustainability. Diane

provided funding for six months of operating costs, covering our utility bills to dog food and everything in between. After that, we're on our own."

"That is not very long," Valentina said and clucked her tongue.

Rhonda bristled. "Giving her an entire town plus six months running costs? It's exceedingly generous."

As she watched the interaction, Layla realised she'd have to tell the others about Rhonda's connection to Diane soon so no one put their foot in it too badly before they made it through the trial period. "I agree, Rhonda, it is very generous. But, at the same time, since it's not a huge amount of time to set ourselves up, I have to be focused."

"Any ideas so far?" Hank asked, nudging Billy Bob's huge head away from his plate.

She wished she could give them a blueprint of a well-developed plan. "Nothing concrete, or on a large enough scale. I am hoping you might have ideas."

"Well," Hank said, "that kitchen is a great set-up. While we were in there tonight, I was thinking I could bake bread and a couple of other staples. And Alberto has already started work on the vegetable patch."

Alberto's face lit up. "Just preparing the soil and area, but with the supplies Eddie brought back today, I can get stuck into it properly tomorrow. Between that and Hank's baking, we should be able to take some pressure off food expenses."

"Fresh vegetables are always a bonus, even if it isn't an issue of finances," Valentina said.

Nell leaned forward to get into Alberto's eyeline. "I love gardening. I'd be keen to help with that project if you like?"

"Like?" Alberto said, grinning. "I'd love help."

"I can sew," Valentina said. "I was already thinking I could sew jackets for the dogs, but what if I made extras that we could sell?"

"That could work," Nell said. "Maybe at the Larch Valley markets or online?"

Hank nodded. "If we're going to sell things, the dog treats we made out of apples went down really well, and we've tweaked the recipe again, including"—he smiled at Rhonda—"a peanut butter option. We could sell gift bags of those at the markets or online too."

Eddie stirred at her side. "I don't have a business brain like the rest of my family, but I can see you have the potential for an appealing brand—a senior dog sanctuary—which will make your products stand out. You're also located in a popular tourist destination, so if you eventually go bigger with the brand, western Massachusetts itself is a drawcard that you can work into the naming and packaging of the things you sell."

Valentina clapped her hands together. "I could make a range of garments—The Applestead Range. Doggie bandanas, bow ties, jackets, blankets, the works." She glanced around. "Does anyone else sew? Rhonda?"

Rhonda straightened her already-straight spine. "No."

Valentina looked across at Layla, eyebrows raised. Layla bunched one shoulder in a little in a tiny shrug.

Barely missing a beat, Valentina said, "I can get a lot of sewing done on my own. I had a large workload at the lingerie company before I retired, and it will feel good to be making things again. Plus, I brought my machine with me. I'd just need some fabric."

A bubble of optimism built in her chest. The ideas weren't enough to support the town, but they were a start, and they were more than she had this morning. Tinkerbell did another pass under the table, looking for donations of food and Layla stroked her ears.

"You know," her father said, smiling at Valentina, "I could probably source as much fabric as—"

"No," Layla said abruptly, having visions of the police or FBI descending en masse to

recover the stolen goods. Eddie raised an eyebrow at her and the others looked quizzical, so she rushed on. “I think I have a lead on fabric, but thanks anyway, Bud.”

Hank stood. “We’ll clear these plates and bring out the main course.”

Valentina pushed her chair back and reached for a plate. “I’ll help.”

Everyone else rose and either chatted or checked on dogs, and Layla used the distraction to tap her father on the arm. “Can I see you for a moment?”

He smiled widely. “Absolutely.”

She headed out to the hotel reception and once they were clear, she grabbed his wrist and pulled him around the corner.

“Knock it off,” she hissed.

“Knock what off, sweetheart?”

“You can find fabric? I suppose in a crate that just fell off the back of a truck?”

A look of hurt passed across his face so fast she almost missed it before his trademark smile was back in place.

“You know, Layla, and this comes from love, but you say you don’t want to be like me or your mother, and yet here you are.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Here I am?”

“Lying.” He sighed, as if saying the words took a toll. “Crossing moral and ethical lines.”

Her world started to spin around her. “I…” but she didn’t know how to complete the sentence.

“You’re telling people I’m your old workmate Buddy Prince. That you’re Layla Cross. That you’re dating Eddie.”

Each lie he called out pierced her heart. But maybe she could save the one lie he didn’t know for sure—Eddie. “We…” She swallowed.

"Funny thing is, there's definitely something between you and Eddie, but he doesn't know you that well, and you're not comfortable enough around him. I'm not sure why you're lying about that, Baby Girl, but you clearly are."

She opened her mouth, closed it again. If her father had seen through the farce, there wasn't much she could say to convince him.

"What a wicked web we weave, hey?"

We weave? Her vision narrowed to just him as her blood began to simmer. His face was full of sympathy but he knew nothing about who she was and the choices she'd made. What she was trying to achieve. How his own sins drove her to do something worthwhile. "I am nothing like you."

"I won't say anything about any of it. Sweetie, I love you and I only want the best for you. I just want you to ask yourself—is this it?"

He cupped the side of her face for a second, two, then walked back into the dining room, greeting Alberto as he did, and heading for Doris's stroller.

Layla stood for a long minute, hand over the centre of her chest, winded.

How dare he pass judgement on her.

And the worst part was the kernel of truth in what he'd said…

Through the door, she caught sight of Eddie making his way through to her, but she couldn't face him right now. Her mind was whirling. She pulled her cell from her pocket and pointed at it, mouthing "sorry" as she edged out the front door onto the street. She just needed a moment, but she noticed a couple of missed calls from Autumn.

She tapped the screen and within one ring Autumn answered.

"Hey, Layla. Am I glad to speak to you."

"Sorry, my cell must have been on silent." She pressed on her closed eyelids for a moment to see if that eased their scratchiness. "What's up?"

"I'm at the clinic and I have a dog here for your sanctuary."

Her heart sank to her toes. She'd just finished explaining to everyone that they were closed to intake during the first phase, but still, she hated having to say no. It was the worst part of being in rescue.

"Autumn, I can't. I'm really sorry but I need to get set up and make sure we get to keep the place before we open the doors."

"I know, but…"

Her words trailed off, and Layla looked up at the canopy of twinkling stars. And realised this was an odd hour for Autumn to be at work.

"Why are you even at the clinic in the evening?" The bookkeeper's position was strictly daytime hours. She just prayed it had nothing to do with Jarrod.

"I stayed back for Scruffy," she said with a catch in her voice.

"Scruffy?"

"The dog I was telling you about. She was brought in this afternoon when someone found her on the road. We checked her microchip details, and she was registered to the shelter. But when Jarrod rang, they said she'd escaped this morning. Also, it was her day to be euthanized." She drew in a sharp breath. "He asked the shelter if we could see if you'd take her and they agreed."

Ooof. That hit her right in the gut. She hated saying no when it meant this dog would be put to sleep. Everything inside her rebelled, wanting to save the dog, knowing she couldn't.

"I can't take another dog. What if we don't pass the trial phase and all the dogs go back into the foster system? I won't have a place for Scruffy, which leaves her with uncertainty. I'm only prepared to take dogs I can guarantee I can look after, and safeguard." And Autumn knew that, which made this even harder.

"What if I guarantee her? I had Goliath, but I'll find a way to have both. Or I'll get you a new foster carer. I promise."

"Why are you this invested in a dog you just met?"

There was a deep sigh. "I don't know, but she's scared and alone and sad, and my heart just breaks for her. And I saw her handed to Janice at the counter and then Jarrod made the call, and they were going to hand her over to the people who would kill her, and I might have over-identified with being the one Jarrod and Janice were discarding, so I told Jarrod to ask them about you."

Layla winced at the pain in Autumn's voice.

There were worse ways of coping with rejection than saving a dog. But still…

"Autumn, you're killing me."

"I'll drive her out to you. Tomorrow. And pick up anything you need here in Boston and bring that too."

The last shred of Layla's resistance snapped and she closed her eyes. "Okay, I'll take her." Explaining to the people inside about breaking the rule was going to be hard. "But if I need to, I'm going to hold you to that guarantee."

"Thank you, Layla," Autumn said, her voice bouncy and bright again. "You'll love her. She's super-adorable."

Layla had no doubt about that. She'd never met a dog she hadn't liked. And the bonus was seeing Autumn again. "Bring a bag and stay the night. If you're coming this far, we may as well catch up, and let you have a look around."

"I can't wait," Autumn said and ended the call.

Layla turned and headed back to the dinner. She hadn't found the peace of mind out here that she'd hoped for—in fact, now she had one more little soul to be responsible for, but at least she was getting some time with her best friend. Tomorrow. After she moved her

father into the hotel to make room for Autumn's sleepover, told the other carers she'd already broken the no intake rule, and had the conversation with Eddie about all her deepest, darkest secrets. She had a last, quick glance up at the stars, and then walked through the hotel door.

*

After the town dinner, Eddie headed home with Willow and Zeb to wait for Layla. She'd gone back to her cabin with Buddy to settle Doris in first. He paced the room. Got a glass of water and tapped his fingers on its side until he thought it might crack. Put it in the sink and paced again.

There were answers he wanted, and he was willing to give some of his own to get them, but he wasn't going to lay his soul bare. He'd give her what he had to give and no more. He paced the room again, then stopped abruptly when she opened his unlocked front door.

"Hey," she said. Her features were tight and drawn and he knew how she felt. He wasn't looking forward to the awkwardness either, but he had to know what was going on with her and Buddy Prince, and her lack of internet footprint. Had to know if Rhonda was right about his grandmother being vulnerable.

"You want anything?" he asked, closing the door behind her.

She shook her head, her long blonde hair spilling over her burgundy shirt. "I'm ready. We just need some ground rules."

"What are you thinking?" He followed her into the living area, standing a few feet apart, as if they were squaring off.

"We invoke a cone of silence," she said, her tone challenging. "Unless you give me your word that nothing goes farther than this room, I'm leaving. I have too much at stake—the dogs, these people who've followed me here."

"Deal." That was an easy thing to promise. In fact, he'd assumed it. "Same for me.

Nothing beyond these walls."

"And," she tipped up her chin, "we take turns. A question for a question."

He regarded her for a long moment, not sure if he was annoyed or amused. "You don't think I'll answer questions if you already answered yours."

"Let's just say I like to be fair." Her pale-green gaze didn't falter.

"Okay, deal on that one too."

"Do you want to go first?"

He really did. And one question burned more than the others. He dug his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "Who is Bud?"

"My father," she said, her tone even and strong.

Her father. Made sense—given their age difference, he'd have guessed Bud was a relative, which meant the clearest possibilities were her father or uncle. But it was still a weird thing to cover up. "Why are you hiding that he's your father?"

"That's two questions."

He cocked his head. "We're being pedantic?"

"We're being fair. My turn. Why is your family worried about you?"

He'd expected this question, but it still hit like a punch to the gut. He braced himself to say the words that were still incomprehensible. Impossible. But true. "My brother Matt committed suicide." He paused. Breathed. Focused on staying upright. "And suicide is contagious. For some reason they assumed I might be the one who caught it."

He'd tried to sound unaffected, flippant even, but knew he'd failed by the sympathy in her features.

"Oh, Eddie. I'm sorry. I didn't realise—"

He held up a hand. The pain was too raw to dissect, especially now when he wanted answers, not to delve into his personal hell. He rolled his shoulders. Loosening them, looking

for his equilibrium. “It’s fine. My turn. I assume Buddy Prince is not your father’s real name.”

“It’s Thomas Landingham,” she said the words precisely, as if she’d been expecting the question and was simply reporting the facts.

“Which is why I can’t find anything about you on the web. Your name is really Layla Landingham.”

She crossed her arms under her breasts, waiting.

“It’s one question,” he said meeting her challenge, “about your family’s name.”

She narrowed her eyes for a beat, then said, “I was born Layla Landingham. I legally changed it a few years ago. Why did you leave the army?”

The restlessness in his limbs returned. He crossed the room to the shiny black kitchen counter and spoke over his shoulder. “I was looking for something that wasn’t there.”

She followed him and pulled herself up to sit on the other side of the L-shaped counter, not letting him hide. “That’s not a full answer.”

True, but it wasn’t an easy thing to articulate. He filled his water glass again for something to do, then set it in the sink. “My family doesn’t have a strong sense of, well, family. It’s more a group of individuals, all with their own competing interests and businesses and personalities.”

“You thought the army could give you that,” she said softly. “It could be your family.”

He shrugged. “I don’t think I was the first person to enter the military seeking a place to belong.” He’d even believed he’d found that for a time. Camaraderie and a shared mission were a strong binding force.

“Which brings me back to the question. Why did you leave?”

Needing a moment to collect his thoughts, to get his throat to work, he picked up his

glass and threw the water back, then stared unseeing through the kitchen window to the back yard. “I was coming up to the time to reenlist when Matt died. It made me think hard about everything. Re-evaluate my life.” He placed his cup in the sink and met her gaze again. “Why the secrecy around your father?”

“He and my mother went to jail.” She wrapped a hand around the back of her neck. “For fraud.” Wincing, she closed her eyes. “With a charity’s money.”

His blood chilled. “What the hell?”

“I know.” She dropped her hand and tilted her head, acknowledging the point. “It’s not a great look for someone asking people to trust her with money.”

He leaned back against the counter, digesting the information. Rhonda had been right—there was something big Layla had been hiding that affected whether she deserved to have the town. Layla Landingham had parents who’d defrauded a charity and one of them was already here. But, try as he might, he couldn’t equate that with the Layla he’d come to know…

“Were you involved?” he said more sharply than he’d intended.

“No. I was eighteen and even though I helped out sometimes, I had no idea.”

He could believe that. He had very little idea about his grandmother’s or parents’ business ventures now, let alone when he was eighteen.

“If, in your words, it’s not a great look, why is he living here?”

“Good question,” she said, glancing up at the ceiling. “Great question. He says he’s hiding from my mother.”

Hiding? That caught his attention. “Is your mother dangerous?”

“Only to him.” She frowned. “Though, I wouldn’t give her access to your bank account.”

He ran the situation through in his mind, trying to look at it from all angles. “Has he

been released from jail? Officially?"

"Apparently he's been out for a year. I'd cut off contact, then he turned up here saying I had to hide him from Mom."

He'd known something was off when Bud—Thomas—was at her front door. It wasn't just that their story was unconvincing, Layla had been flustered. At the time, he'd wondered if it was partly due to her jumping up from the bed they'd just shared, but now the pieces fitted together.

"You know, I think your family is as messed up as mine, and that's saying something."

She snorted a humorless laugh. "Which is why I changed my name and moved away."

"Does my grandmother know?" he asked, even though he was certain he already knew the answer.

"No. She's the one I'm mainly worried about." She tucked her hair behind her ears. "What's the rest of the story with your brother's death?"

He stilled. "What do you mean?"

"Come on. I just laid out everything you asked me to. And I can tell there's more. What is it?"

The trembling started deep inside and he squeezed his eyes shut to control it. He couldn't tell her. Could he? And yet… she was right—she'd shared everything he'd asked. She deserved the same in return. If he could form the words.

He swallowed hard. "He called me."

"Called you when?"

"Just before he died." He had to force the words out through a tight jaw. "Instead of leaving a note, he called me."

He pushed off the counter and strode across the room, wishing he could outrun the

memories as easily.

"Oh, Eddie."

He raked his fingers through his hair. "I was deployed, too far away to do anything, but he didn't want that anyway."

"What did he want?"

"He made me promise to watch over his son."

Willow drew herself to her feet, stretched her entire spotty body, and padded across to him. He crouched and let her lick his face before wrapping his arms around her middle. She might not be able to hear, but she usually knew when to offer him comfort, and right now, he appreciated her instincts more than he could say.

Layla jumped down from the counter and sat on the rug near him and Willow, leaning her back against the sofa. "Did you tell Matt's wife?"

"I wanted to tell Caroline. I started to. But she was distraught about Matt not leaving her a note or calling her, and it just felt cruel to say that he'd given me that call instead of her. Especially when Matt and I rarely saw eye to eye. We weren't the closest of brothers." There just hadn't seemed to be any point to telling her when it would only increase her pain.

There was silence for the longest time, while he stroked Willow and felt Layla's undemanding gaze on him.

Finally, she drew her knees up to her chest and looped her arms around them. "You haven't told anyone this before, have you?"

"There didn't seem a reason," he said without looking up.

"Maybe because you wouldn't have to carry that inside?"

If it was a choice between him carrying something heavy inside or a new widow doing it? No contest. "I'm fine. I just wanted access to Jonathon, but Caroline seems to think that since Matt and I weren't close, giving me time with his son isn't a priority."

"You're trying to fulfill your brother's last wish, and no one else thinks it's important because they don't know it was his last wish."

"Pretty much." His hands trembled so he squeezed them tight and released them. "So, what are you going to do about your father?"

"Let him stay for the short term and work it out later. What are you going to do about Jonathon?"

"Not tell anyone about the call, if that's what you're asking." He rubbed a finger across his forehead. "I'll keep showing that he's a priority to me and she'll eventually let me be in his life. What are you going to do if my grandmother finds out about your parents?"

"Throw myself on her mercy. Please tell me she shows mercy…?" She gave him such a hopeful smile that he chuckled.

"She does, but it's unpredictable."

Willow stepped away, shook herself, then trotted over to Zeb and curled up with him. Eddie smiled as he watched her go. Apparently he'd pulled himself together enough that he didn't need her support anymore.

"Where does this leave us?" Layla asked.

He crawled over and sat beside Layla on the rug, leaning back on the sofa, and she stretched her legs out alongside his.

"Well," he said, "I've told you more than I intended. More than I've told anyone else, actually."

"The only other person who knows all of the stuff I told you tonight is my friend Autumn."

"I think what this means is that we're on each other's team now."

She slid to the side, resting her head on his shoulder. He liked it there. Liked her being close. Liked the feeling of them having each other's back.

"You'll still help me even though I lied to your grandmother?"

"I'm not crazy about that, but I can see why you did it. I think it will probably come out eventually, these things usually do, but for now, I will respect the cone of silence and keep helping you."

Her hand brushed against the back of his, and he turned, her fingers sliding between his, locking their hands together. Something in his chest seemed to lock into place at the same time.

"Thank you," she whispered. "And I'll help you get access to Jonathon where I can."

"Thank you." He traced a pattern over her palm with his thumb. "What about us?"

"To the world, we're still a couple. That still helps you with keeping your grandmother off your back, and now with Caroline letting you see Jonathon. And I'm still happy for the extra things you're doing in in the town in exchange."

"And behind closed doors?" Even saying the words made his pulse pick up speed.

"It would probably be better if we went back to having clear lines," she said, but she didn't move away. If anything, she leaned in closer to his side, and every place her body touched his started a slow burn.

"You think sleeping together will blur them?" He turned to look down at her face, so close to his, close enough to kiss if he leaned a little... "I happen to think it makes us more convincing."

There was a catch in her breath. "At what cost?"

He pushed off the sofa and twisted around to face her, but didn't release her hand. Couldn't. "What are you worried about?"

"Honestly?" One corner of her mouth hitched up in a sad smile.

"After everything we just shared," he said, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear, "I won't stand for anything less."

"Okay." She swallowed. "What if we fall for our own spin? Get confused about what we're doing."

It was a reasonable question—the military had taught him that clear lines and boundaries were optimal. But he wanted her badly, that the risk was worth the chance to kiss her again.

"We won't have time to get confused. I'm leaving in two months. Think of this as a holiday romance. Time-limited, but that only adds to the urgency." His fingers drifted up and down her arm, and she shivered. "We have our fun, I help you get the sanctuary operating, you help me with Jonathon, then I drive out and we have good memories to keep us warm at night."

"Okay." She leaned close and brushed a feather-light kiss across his lips. "You've convinced me."

"Thank the heavens," he murmured, "because I was getting close to begging." He wrapped an arm around her waist and rolled them until they were stretched together on the rug and he could feel every one of her curves pressed against him.

"Begging?" She kissed her way from his mouth, across his cheek, to his earlobe. "Now that I would like to have seen."

He shuddered. "I don't think it will be that hard for you to make happen."

"Challenge accepted," she said, and he laughed and kissed her again.

Chapter Twelve

Rhonda woke slowly to sunlight streaming through her bedroom window and a large, warm presence at her back. She frowned as she scrambled to get her mind to work. Only one option presented itself—Mr. Darcy had crept onto her bed overnight.

She reached for her glasses on her bedside table then rolled over to examine the situation. Sure enough, the greyhound lay sprawled across the blue floral covers, his black fur partly hidden by his yellow-and-black striped coat. He looked like an elongated bumble bee among the flowers.

"Mr. Darcy," she said quietly, "I think we may have a breakdown in communication."

He stretched his impossibly long legs, releasing a groan as he did. Then his head suddenly lifted, his long neck twisting to see her. Clearly the hound had forgotten until that moment that he'd invaded forbidden territory. Large, dark eyes gazed steadily at her, and the rest of his body barely moved.

Rhonda regarded him back, uncertain now. She'd been sure about the boundary lines, but his gaze was so steady, so… aware. Like there was someone behind those eyes. He was

waiting for her to move, his ears back behind his head, far enough that they practically disappeared. A lump formed in her throat. It wasn't much to ask—a soft place to lay his pathetically skinny body. And there was room on the bed.

"Okay, you can stay." She reached out and ran a hand down his side, over the fleecy coat and back to the fur on his hind legs. "But if you could keep the shedding to a minimum, I'd appreciate it."

Mr. Darcy relaxed under her hand, then stretched again and rolled onto his back, four feet in the air. Rhonda allowed herself a small smile. She'd looked greyhounds up on the internet and all the sites talked about 'roaching'—lying just like this, as if they were a dead cockroach. She hadn't had him long, but this was definitely the most relaxed she'd seen him. Her heart clenched as she absorbed the meaning. He liked her. More than that, he trusted her. Why, she had no idea, but it made her unexpectedly happy that he did. A tear formed in the corner of her eye and she blinked it away.

"You're a good boy, Mr. Darcy," she said soothingly. She stroked down over the bumble bee coat again, noticing just how thin he was. For all the length he had in his legs, tail, nose, and body, he barely had enough width to seem viable.

"You need fattening up," she said. "And in the meantime, you need something warmer than this coat."

Decision made, she reached for her cell from the bedside, and pressed the autodial for Diane's private number.

"Rhonda, dear, this is early," her friend said when she picked up. "Are you okay?"

She glanced at the clock. 6.30am. "Sorry, I hadn't seen the time."

"Not a problem," Diane said. She'd likely been up for an hour and a half already, checking morning papers and news from overnight.

Rhonda cleared her throat. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Hang on a minute." Her voice became muffled. "Persephone! Get down off there!" "Sorry," she said, her voice clear again. "Anything. You know that."

"In the wardrobe in my room, on the top shelf at the back, is a large bag of yarn and knitting needles. Can you send that out to me?" There were a number of balls of several colors, which should be enough to get her started.

"Consider it done. Should I put my order in a for a sweater now?"

Rhonda rested a protective hand on Mr. Darcy's side. "I'm going to knit some pyjamas for this ridiculously skinny dog."

"Why don't you just feed him up?"

"Easier said than done with greyhounds. This one seems to have no body fat." His ribs were a row of ridges rising through the coat.

"How are things going with him?" Diane had practically cackled with glee when Rhonda had told her that Layla had allocated her a dog like the other residents.

"He's pushing boundaries, but…he's growing on me."

"Glad to hear it. He sounds like a sweetheart."

It was true that, despite his history, Mr. Darcy had been very polite since moving in. Diane was right—he was a sweetheart. She rubbed the back of his long neck and he let out a extended, content sigh.

"How is everything else out there?" Diane asked. "Made any friends yet?"

"There's not a huge assortment of people to choose from," she said dryly.

"What about the woman Layla was always talking about? Virginia? Victoria?"

"Valentina. She's…" How did she politely say this? Valentina Ramirez was overwhelming. Too loud, too confident. Too beautiful. Too popular with the other residents. "She's too much."

"That's a shame," Diane said, as if she'd already moved on. "How's Layla?"

Rhonda stroked Mr. Darcy's velvet ears and thought about the wording of her reply.

"She's fine, but how much do you know about Layla? Really?"

"I know enough," Diane said, sounding distracted. "Persephone! No! Spit that out!"

"Because I'm not convinced—"

Another ring tone went off in the background and Rhonda recognized it as the tone on one of Diane's work cell phones.

"Darling, I have to take that, but I just want you to know that I'm proud of you and how well you're doing."

Then the call ended, and Rhonda dropped the phone back onto the covers. Being friends with Diane was sometimes like trying to catch a summer's breeze—lovely when it was there, but if you tried to grab it, it slipped through your fingers. "Looks like it's just you and me now, Mr. Darcy."

The greyhound snuggled closer and laid his head on Rhonda's lap.

*

At midday, Layla stood on the road in front of the cabins, watching out for Autumn's bright yellow hatchback. Her skin still tingled after spending the night in Eddie's bed, and her heart was filled to the brim, yet somehow also lighter.

She'd sneaked home just before dawn. There was no good reason to hide, given that everyone thought they were sleeping together anyway, but making love with Eddie felt personal… private, and different to the relationship the others thought they were having. It was something she didn't want to share.

Over breakfast with her father, she'd floated the idea of him moving down to the hotel for a couple of nights while Autumn stayed. She planned on sitting up all night talking with her best friend—perhaps sharing a midnight margarita or two. Her father had been thrilled with the idea, practically bouncing around the cabin, making plans for setting up his

temporary ‘bachelor pad.’ Layla was still nervous about letting him out of her sight, but he seemed to have slipped easily into his role as Buddy Prince, and was committed to it, so she decided to let go of worrying about it for now.

She and Buddy moved his stuff into the hotel after breakfast. He didn’t have much, so it was mainly about setting up one of the hotel guest rooms and putting fresh linen on the bed. Her father had asked if he could take Doris with him—they’d developed something of a bond—but she wasn’t ready to trust him with a dog’s care. The little spaniel was too vulnerable, and if Buddy’s attention strayed and he got caught up doing something else and forgot about her, with her weak back legs, Doris couldn’t just find him and ask for help. He took the decision well, and said he still wanted to come up during the day and take her for walks in her stroller and spend time with her.

It wasn’t long before the buttercup yellow car appeared in the distance, heading down the access road. Layla was buzzed, both to see her friend and to meet a new dog. That part never got old. She threw her arms into the air, waving to catch Autumn’s attention and guide her to the right cabin.

Autumn pulled up, jumped out and hugged Layla. “Thank you for doing this,” she said. “It’s ridiculously good to see you!”

“I’m just thrilled to have you visit.”

Autumn gave her a last squeeze, released her and walked to the back of the car. Layla followed as Autumn opened the hatchback.

Dull brown eyes looked up, then away. The dog was medium-sized, with a short grey coat that didn’t sit flat, but wasn’t quite long enough to curl. Possibly poodle in the coat—clipped down short. The blocky shaped head and body weren’t poodle though, they were unmistakably pit bull. A pitti-poo. A bulloodle.

“Oh, sweetie,” Layla said softly.

Valentina rushed through her gate. “I want to meet the new doggie.” She leaned over Layla’s shoulder and gasped. “She is adorable. And she has the cutest little overbite. It reminds me of my abuela.”

Layla had always loved dogs with overbites and underbites. They added so much character to their faces. Once this old girl was happier and her eyes came alive, she’d be full of personality. Her favorite part of rescue was being a part of a dog’s recovery. Giving them the gift of safety and love that allowed them to find their true selves again.

“Hello little one,” Valentina cooed. “I tell from your eyes that you’ve seen things. You’ve survived things. But you’re safe, and you’ll be loved for the rest of your life, I promise.”

Autumn smoothed her hand down the dog’s neck. “See, Scruffy? I promised we were going to the best place in the world, and I delivered, didn’t I?”

“Scruffy is not her name,” Valentina said firmly. “She needs a strong name. A beautiful name. Like her.”

Layla looked at her short fur. “She’s not even scruffy.”

“When the shelter found her,” Autumn said, still gently stroking her, “she had curly, matted hair. They shaved it off and bathed her, but the name stuck.”

Layla watched Autumn’s movements and the new dog’s reaction—which was nothing. She just… endured. “Does she know the name?”

“Not really.” Autumn sat on the edge of the hatchback opening. “I’ve said it to her a fair bit over the last twenty-four hours and she hasn’t responded. But then she’s pretty shut down so she’s not really responding to anything.”

“Did they check at the clinic to see if she’s deaf?” Deafness in senior dogs wasn’t that uncommon, especially in strays and neglected dogs who hadn’t had treatment for ear infections or other ear problems. Layla had fostered a few deaf seniors over the years.

"She flinches at loud and unexpected noises," Autumn said. "Jarrod said she can hear, she just doesn't care too much."

"What do you think about us changing her name?" Layla asked.

Autumn smiled at the dog. "I like the idea, and I don't think it will make a difference to her."

"I usually try a few and see if the dog likes any of them but I don't think that will work for this sweetheart," Layla said. "Autumn, since you're the one who saved her, do you want to choose a new name?"

Autumn tucked her long, red hair behind her ears and turned to Valentina. "What was your abuela's name?"

Valentina's face softened. "Rafaela."

"Would you mind?" Autumn asked. "If we called her that?"

Valentina's eyes widened and then filled with tears. "I would be honored."

"Hello, Rafaela," Layla said softly, careful not to get too close and intimidate her. Rafaela ignored her as much to that name as she had to Scruffy. "You're home now."

Valentina stroked the dog's ears. "You're family now."

Hank and Alberto approached in a golf cart—Alberto driving and Hank beside him with Tinkerbell draped across his lap. They slowed to a stop.

Layla put a hand up to her face to shield her eyes from the sun. "Out for a drive?"

"On our way to the orchard to grab a few more buckets of apples," Hank said. "Couldn't rouse Billy Bob from his favorite bed, so it's just us and Tink."

Alberto leaned forward, his forearms resting on the steering wheel. "Is that our newest resident in the back?"

"Meet Rafaela," Valentina said, pride in her voice.

Hank looked at Layla. "You want us to give her some space before she meets us and

Tink?"

Layla wrapped a hand around the back of her neck. She needed to see how Rafaela was with other dogs. Her plan had been to try her with Zeb before she let her near Doris, but Tink was better—there wasn't a threatening bone in the Labrador's body. Everyone loved Tinkerbell. Well, everyone but Goliath.

"Since you're here, can you bring Tink over? Casually."

They slowly got out of the cart and let Tink wander before leading her to the open hatchback. Once she realized there was a new dog, Tink wagged her heavy tail, her ears soft and relaxed. She approached Rafaela, lifting her thick, black snout to touch noses, slow enough to allow the other dog to turn away if she wanted. Rafaela watched her with no expression. She didn't move to return the greeting, to shy away, growl or bristle. She simply sat and watched Tinkerbell. Layla had fostered a few emotionally detached dogs in the past, dogs who had learned that their needs wouldn't be met, or who'd had no way to keep themselves safe, and had simply shut down, and every time it broke her heart to see.

"Thanks," Layla said as Hank stepped away. "At least she's unlikely to be aggressive with Doris."

"Anytime," Hank said as he picked Tink up and climbed into the golf cart again.

"You know she is not a lap dog," Valentina said, suppressing a smile.

Alberto grinned. "Says who? Every time Hank sits down on his armchair, Tink is up on his lap."

"Tinkerbell wants to live her best lapdog life," Hank said. "Who am I to stand in her way?"

They waved and drove off, Tinkerbell doing a slow, happy pant as she surveyed the world around her.

Autumn rested a hand on Rafaela's head. "Will we take her straight inside or walk

around first?"

"Zeb is out with Eddie," Layla said. "There's only Doris inside. How about we get Rafaela settled—let her have a sniff around the cabin and a snack, and then find somewhere she feels safe enough to nap. Valentina, would you sit with her after that for a while so I can show Autumn around?"

"I would love to," Valentina said. "I think Rafaela and I will have a special friendship."

*

Thirty minutes later, Layla and Autumn wandered through the park, leaves crunching under their feet.

"Layla, I love this town." Face raised to the sun, Autumn held her arms wide and twirled in a complete circle. "It's the most adorable thing."

Layla smiled as she watched her friend. It had been far too long since those lines of tension around her eyes had relaxed, or that she'd looked this free. "I love it too. Sometimes I forget to see it while I'm busy trying to build the dream."

"You've done an amazing job already. And the people are just the best."

That was mainly true, but there was something she'd been putting off admitting. "You haven't met everyone yet."

"You mean Rhonda?" Autumn twirled again in a lazy sweep of arms, her long, red hair trailing in her wake.

"She's a treat. But someone else too." She dug her hands into her pockets. "My father is here."

Autumn stopped twirling and blinked as she righted herself. "Wait. What? Didn't you say you'd told people here that he was dead?"

"He showed up a few days ago and asked me to hide him. I agreed against my better

judgement, and now he's staying here, calling himself Buddy Prince. The story is that we used to work together. At an ice rink."

Autumn burst out laughing. "Are you serious? That is just too precious."

"Precious is not the word." She looked across the park and saw her father heading for her, pushing Doris in her stroller. "Speak of the devil."

He waved and headed over. Doris sat back in her cushions, elbow resting on the stroller arm, her long ears billowing in the breeze created by their pace, pure doggy joy on her face. And she was wearing goggles.

Autumn laughed as they drew near. "That dog looks as cool as James Dean. Or maybe Penelope Pitstop."

"This is Doris," Layla said, giving Doris a tickle at the back of her head.

"You must be Autumn," Bud said, thrusting out his hand. "I'm Buddy Prince. You can call me Bud."

Autumn glanced at her, a question in her eyes as she said, "Hi Bud."

"She knows who you are," Layla said quietly, even though no one was nearby.

He seemed surprised but pivoted quickly. "Then it's especially nice to meet you."

"Same," Autumn said. She looked from one to the other and back again. "You know, I'm surprised no one has picked it up. You have the same nose. And the green eyes."

"Thank you," he said, beaming.

Layla ignored the comment and focused in on the most important issue. "This is the last time we acknowledge that fact. From now on, you think he's only Bud. There's too much riding on keeping Diane from finding out."

"Got it," Autumn said.

"Roger that," her father said.

Layla stroked the long, silky ears Doris had inherited from one of her various spaniel

ancestors. “What is she wearing?”

Bud’s eyes lit up. “I looked on the internet and it said that if I want to go fast, the wind could damage her eyes, especially since she’s a mature-aged girl. I found these swimming goggles at the hotel and adjusted them a bit. Apparently, you can buy ones made just for dogs, but this will do in the meantime.”

Layla took a small step back. “That’s… very considerate of you, Bud.”

“And where’s our new resident?” Bud asked. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Rafaela,” Layla said, liking the way the name sounded. “She was exhausted, so Valentina stayed with her while she had a nap. I’m just showing Autumn around a bit while Rafaela sleeps.”

Doris looked straight ahead and gave a deep bark. “Right you are, Doris,” Bud said. “We have places to go. See you later, Autumn.”

“Well, then,” Autumn said.

Layla nodded. “Yeah.”

They walked down the road, without any destination in mind, and when Layla saw the large sheds where Eddie was working today, she realized her subconscious had probably done it on purpose. And she couldn’t find any reason to disagree with its choice.

Eddie was inside, carrying an armful of tins and stuff to the trailer. His old jeans hugged his hips, and the denim, soft with wear, encased strong thighs and fell to the top of his work boots. His dark hair was messy—she could imagine his fingers running through it during the morning as he thought through his tasks—topped by a light sprinkle of sawdust. After dumping the tins and tools into the trailer, he straightened and caught sight of them. In that first, unguarded moment, his eyes lit up and a slow smile spread across his face, and she just about melted into a puddle on the floor.

Zeb noticed her and came bounding over, whining and wagging his bushy tail,

Willow only a couple of steps behind. Eddie dusted his hands off on a rag and sauntered over.

"Autumn, this is Eddie," she said, doing her best not to stammer. "Eddie, Autumn."

He nodded at Autumn, then returned his attention to her. Once he reached her, he slid an arm around her waist and leaned down to place a lingering kiss on her lips. Her pulse spiked as the world around her spun.

He broke the contact as slowly as he'd begun it, then turned to Autumn. "Nice to meet you."

"Pleasure's all mine," she said, grinning. "I've heard a lot about you."

Layla swallowed and tried to get her brain to work. "Autumn knows about us. The fake-dating."

"I know," Eddie said. "You mentioned that last night."

He'd kissed her, and had done it in a bone-melting way, as if proving they were dating, even when he didn't have to? "I just thought—"

"That," he said, one corner of his mouth hitching up, "was because I felt like it."

She was mesmerized, her lungs barely moving. "Oh."

Autumn cleared her throat. "If you two don't hose it down a bit, this entire wooden building is going to combust around you."

Eddie chuckled and stepped back. "Fair point."

Zeb and Willow lost interest, wandered back to a pile of blankets on a crate near the trailer Eddie had been working on, and curled up together.

"I had a call from Caroline this morning." He leaned a hip against the hood of his Jeep. "She's agreed to let Jonathon stay when she comes out to the east coast in a few weeks."

"We'll have to start planning some fun stuff." They'd agreed to help each other with their goals, and she'd meant it. This was what Eddie wanted, and even though it would be

extra work for her to manage the dogs with a small child around, she'd do what she could to make it work.

He paused for a long beat then smiled. "Thank you."

"On another topic," she said, "what would you think about Zeb spending the night with you and Willow while Rafaela settles in?"

He glanced over at the dogs who were curled up together. "I think that'd work fine."

"Great, thanks." She grabbed her ponytail and wound it around a finger, until she realized that probably made her look like a teenager, so she released it. "I'm just showing Autumn around the town. I'll catch you later."

"Looking forward to it," he said, laced with meaning and she had the urge to start that kiss all over again…

Once they were out on the street and heading back to the main part of town, Autumn said, "If you dare tell me again that there's nothing real between you, I'll slap you."

"There's something," she said. "But not enough."

"Are you kidding me? The heat you generated almost sent the entire town up in flames."

Layla felt herself blush. "Chemistry isn't everything. He's leaving, off on whatever adventure he's planning for himself. And I'm tied to this town."

"Speaking of this town," Autumn said tentatively. "I worked at the clinic yesterday, and all my other work is online—I can do it from here, or anywhere. That means I don't have to be back in Boston for six days."

Layla's jaw dropped. "Are you going to stay with me until then?"

"If it's okay with you? I was hoping?"

"Yes!" Layla pulled her into a hug. "All the yeses."

"Thank you," Autumn mumbled into Layla's shoulder, then, with a final squeeze,

stepped back from the hug. “I need a bit of time away from Boston to regroup.”

“After Jarrod,” Layla said so Autumn didn’t have to.

She nodded as she swiped at her eyes. “Get back on my feet. I’ll have to do some bookkeeping on my laptop each day, but other than that, I’m at your disposal.”

Layla linked elbows with Autumn and set off down the street again. The sanctuary had just had its very first intake of a new dog, things were great with Eddie, and now her best friend was staying for almost a week. Life in Applestead was turning out even better than Layla had dared to hope.

Chapter Thirteen

With Rafaela at her feet, Layla stood with most of Applestead's other residents in front of the long piece of electrical tape that Eddie had set up as a ribbon that she could cut for the great unveiling. It had been four weeks since the day she'd suggested he build the sensory garden, and he'd been working in semi-secrecy. He'd built a fence around the patch, temporarily wrapped it with plastic sheets and planks, and asked her not to look.

"Did anyone peek?" she asked the others.

"I was tempted," Valentina said. "A couple of days ago I was up before anyone else and I walked past with J.R. and Goliath, and I was very curious. But I decided if Eddie could take the time to build it, I could have a little more patience."

Eddie's head popped up from inside the enclosure, checked the crowd, then disappeared again, obviously making last minute adjustments. Layla bit down on a smile. The sight of him made her skin heat. They'd been sharing a bed most nights and she was starting to believe that they were building something between them. That they had more than a cover story and chemistry.

Autumn nudged her and tipped her head to the road. Rhonda and Mr. Darcy were approaching, both with heads held high, Rhonda carrying a plastic bag, and the greyhound modelling his latest knitted onesie—this time a cobalt blue with black cuffs and neckline. It was the third outfit he'd worn recently. Layla had wanted to ask about where the outfits were coming from but didn't want to jinx Rhonda's sudden interest in her companion.

As she joined the group, Rhonda handed Nell the bag. "I thought you might like these."

Nell thanked her and took the bag. She pulled out three tiny, knitted onesies, all in soft pastel colors. "These are beautiful."

"Those dogs are small," Rhonda said with a shrug, "and the weather is getting colder."

Nell held a pale blue knitted garment up. "They're so special. I was going to take the dogs to Eddie's new grooming station at the hotel for a bath tomorrow, but now I'm thinking I'll do it today so they'll be lovely and clean when I put these on them."

Bud pushed Doris's stroller closer and admired Rhonda's handiwork, and was soon joined by Valentina and Alberto.

Autumn turned back to Layla. "I've emailed you the updated spreadsheets of the sanctuary's financial position."

Having a bookkeeper staying at Applestead was a definite bonus. Autumn had originally planned to stay for six days, but she'd extended a few times, driving back to Boston weekly to do her day at the vet clinic, staying the night at her apartment then coming back to Applestead the next morning. The trips had been great for Layla to order supplies, and Hank had asked Autumn to grab some things from his storage unit a couple of times. And it had given her plenty of time to go through the sanctuary's financial paperwork.

"I've been both anticipating and dreading the update. At least tell me things look a

little better?"

Autumn shot her a sympathetic look. "Make sure you have coffee when you look. Or gin."

"That bad," Layla said, trying not to wince.

"You're running through Diane's starter money at one and a half times the rate you can afford."

Layla groaned. "We're not going to make it to six months?" She'd known it was tight, and that they would be basically driving off a cliff at the end unless she came up with other income streams, but she hadn't realized the cliff was this close.

"I have some ideas," Autumn said as Rafaela shifted her weight. Autumn gave her a quick pat, which the dog ignored. "This afternoon I'm going to build you a website and look at some fundraising options."

"Thank you." They'd have to be monster-sized ideas to make enough of a difference, but she had to do something. These people were all depending on her. She couldn't give up.

Eddie emerged from the other side of the enclosure, methodically taking down the plastic sheeting and wood planks, revealing the mystery inside piece by piece.

Valentina gasped. "Oh, my."

Nell edged closer with her pack of fluffy dogs. "Eddie," she said in wonder.

Layla blinked. She had asked for a place the dogs could stimulate their senses when their legs weren't up to long walks. But this—this was something next level. There were climbing ramps and tunnels, a large sand pit, and a raised platform covered in rubber that would provide good grip for paws. On the far side she could see an inground wading pool with fountain, and a hedge of herbs along one edge. She couldn't wait to get inside and see what other surprises he'd included.

Eddie approached with a lopsided smile and handed her a pair of scissors. "Ready?"

"Eddie," she said, taking the scissors, "this is much, much more than I'd imagined."

"Let's hope the dogs like it." He stepped back but his gaze was warm as it stayed on her. "Cut the ribbon and we can take them through."

She raised the scissors and the chatting quietened. "I am honored to announce the official opening of the…" she glanced at Eddie "…does it have a name?"

Eddie shook his head. "You choose something."

She looked at the Dalmatian leaning against his leg, gazing up at him adoringly. "The official opening of Willow's Garden."

A cheer went up and she snipped the electrical tape in front of the gate.

"Who's first?" Eddie asked.

"Willow," Alberto called. "It's named for her, after all."

Eddie ruffled his dog's ears. "She went in a lot when I was working on it. Let one of the others have the honor."

Layla glanced around. Rafaela was lying at her feet, ignoring everyone. She'd made huge progress since her arrival, and wasn't nearly as shut down, but she was still… aloof. "Rafaela?"

"Excellent choice," Bud said.

Layla squatted near the dog's square-jawed face. "Hey, Rafaela," she said softly. "Want to come with me and see something fun?"

The dog lifted her head, but without much enthusiasm.

"Come on." Layla stood and Rafaela reluctantly dragged herself to her feet and followed to the fence.

Eddie unlatched the gate and they walked through. The fence was six feet high and made of chain wire, allowing Layla to see the expressions of anticipation on the crowd. She unclipped the leash from Rafaela's harness and kissed the top of her salt and pepper head.

“Go forth and explore,” she said.

Rafaela stood unmoving, her long, scruffy tail between her legs, and Layla’s heart cracked as it always did when she watched her.

Eddie slipped through the gate and came to Layla’s side. “How about I show her around?”

“Thanks.” She was interested to see him move around in the space he’d created.

Eddie trotted over to the climbing ramp—a wooden structure that was a low A-frame, with crossbeams for footholds. His fast movement caught Rafaela’s attention and she watched as he stepped on the ramp.

“Hey, Raffi,” he called. “This is fun. Come and join me!”

The gray dog watched but made no move to join him. Eddie trotted around the enclosure, calling her name, but there was still no reaction. Time for a change of plan. Layla clipped the leash back on the harness and led Rafaela to the herbs, past the tunnel, and the fountain. No response.

She glanced up at Eddie, hoping he wasn’t demoralized by the lack of interest from the first dog to experience Willow’s Garden, but his gaze was focused on Rafaela, all concern for her.

“Can I try?” he asked.

“Absolutely.”

He took the leash and gently led her past the ropes and cones to the sandpit. It was about eight-foot square, and filled with pure white, fine-grain sand. Rafaela stepped in, following Eddie, then hesitated. She bent to sniff the sand around her feet, then, as she took a few more steps, her tail lifted a few inches.

“You like that?” Eddie said beside her and unclipped her leash again.

Rafaela took another few steps, and her body lost some of the tension she always

seemed to be carrying.

Layla stepped in with her and completely removed the harness. “There you go, Rafaela. Explore.”

“I’m crossing every finger and toe,” Hank said from his spot, leaning on the fence, and Nell replied, “Me too.”

With slow movements, Eddie and Layla edged out of the sandpit, leaving the cautious dog with all the room to herself. Rafaela carefully lowered herself to the ground, rolled onto her back, and began twisting and wriggling on the soft, moving surface, scratching her back, stretching her limbs, luxuriating in sensual pleasure.

“Good girl,” Layla said, a lump forming in her throat. It was the first time she’d seen the dog showing enthusiasm for anything. Even at dinnertime, Rafaela always seemed like she could take it or leave it. But this simple pleasure? This she was clearly enjoying.

In one smooth movement Rafaela was on her feet again. She cast a quick look around the pit, then leapt once like a rabbit and began digging. The sand her front paws displaced went under her body, between her back legs and formed a pile behind her.

“Her tail,” Valentina said, her voice breaking.

Rafaela’s tail was wagging. Slowly at first, then faster as her legs went faster.

Eddie’s hand slipped into Layla’s, interlacing their fingers, squeezing tight. The way his Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat showed her he was as affected as she and the others were. And at that moment, something became startingly clear.

She loved him. As the knowledge settled over her, it seemed stark and confronting, and yet it was so obvious she was surprised she’d only just realized.

She loved that he would take the time to ensure these old dogs were happy, and that his instinct was to share this moment of wonder with her. She loved that he was working hard to gain access to his nephew to fulfill the dying wish of a brother he hadn’t even been close

to. She loved sharing coffee with him first thing in the morning, and the way he set her skin alight.

Something that had started as pretend, had moved into a holiday fling, and now had somehow become very real. And yet he'd never betrayed ideas of staying—he frequently mentioned how things would work once he was gone or asked about taking Zeb when he left.

A shiver raced down her spine and she turned to watch Rafaela playing in the sand. Layla had been hiding her true self for so long, changing her name, her hair, her history, and Eddie was the first person she'd dated since her parents had been arrested who knew the real her. Their relationship might have been fake, but she'd been her real self with him. The true Layla.

A rejection from him would hurt that much more than the other breakups, since she'd been able to attribute them to not trying. But this was her. And he'd not once implied he wanted more of her. Restlessness prickled and flowed through her veins. The easy path would be to stay silent and let it play out, see if he left or stayed. Yet, how could she show less bravery than Rafaela? Rafaela had been crippled by her fears and poor expectations of people, but this morning, that girl had overcome her distrust and opened herself up to an experience and found her bliss. How could Layla do anything less? She had to follow her example.

They were surrounded by the town now, but as soon as they were alone, she needed to tell him. Her lungs cramped at the thought, but she wouldn't give in to fear and hide her feelings.

"Thank you," she said, squeezing his hand. "We've tried everything we could think of, but you've given her what she needed."

He glanced down at her, and gave her a slow smile, stopping her heart for a full beat.

"You're very welcome," he said. "Besides, it was your idea."

After Rafaela was done—which didn't take long, her fitness was low—Autumn took her back to Layla's cabin for a well-earned nap, and Nell released Princess, Crystal and Burrito into the enclosure. As soon as their harnesses were removed, they sprinted in three different directions, running through the tunnels, kicking up sandstorms in the pit as they barreled through, leaping over paving stones, scrambling over the climbing frame, barking at each other in their joy. Despite the cold, Burrito launched himself into the shallow wading pool, and snapped at the water coming through the fountain.

"Since that water is coming in from the pond," Eddie said, chuckling, "it's easy enough to refill."

"That's going to be great in summer." If they passed the trial phase and even made it to summer…

When the SWFs were done, Billy Bob and Tinkerbell were set free inside, and then the rest of the dogs took turns exploring. Bud pushed Doris's stroller through the gate and lifted her out, allowing her to explore on her wobbly legs. Her favorite part seemed to be sniffing the herb garden.

"I think we can call this a success," Layla said as she watched Doris follow her nose.

"Eddie," Valentina said, adjusting Goliath in her arms. "This is magnificent. You are magnificent."

Faint patches of color appeared on his cheeks. "I'll need to scoop some of that sand back in when they're done. In fact, I might extend the sand pit—it was pretty popular."

The crowd dwindled, people taking their dogs home for naps and a toweling off once they'd had their turn, until she was alone with Eddie, standing in the enclosure while Zeb and Willow explored.

"I can't tell you how grateful I am for this," she said, still full of wonder. "You didn't just do what I asked—you researched and extended the idea and created something

wonderful."

He turned to her, smiling into her eyes. "It was worth it to see the dogs' reactions."

Butterflies filled her stomach, and she knew it was time—they were alone, and she'd promised herself that as soon as she had a chance, she'd tell him how she felt. But now the opportunity was here, her courage was leaching away. She reached up and ran a hand down the side of his face, the bristles of his three-day growth rough against her palm. He'd become precious to her, necessary to her. She moistened her lips. "I need you to know something else."

He raised an eyebrow. "That sounds ominous."

"Eddie, I love you." She said the words slowly, carefully, allowing them to sit in the air.

"Not what I was expecting," he said, his face neutral.

"Me neither, to be honest," she said ruefully. "This thing between us was fake, and I expected it would stay that way and I'd be a little sad when you left, but at some point it started to feel like an actual relationship. We spend most of our nights in the same bed, you're the first person I want to talk to in the morning, your opinion matters the most. Yours is the hand I want to hold, Eddie. You're the person I want to be with."

"Layla," he said voice deep, "those things are true for me too, but…" His voice trailed off as he watched Zeb chase Willow over the climbing frame.

"If they're true for you too," she paused and tried to channel Rafaela's courage, "then why not stay? Give us a real shot at a proper relationship?"

He rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand as he held it. "Staying would be a commitment, and I'm not sure we're ready for that."

"It doesn't have to be. There would be nothing tying you to Applestead and you could leave at any time." She wouldn't beg, but now she was doing this she needed to follow

through. Put all her cards on the table.

"If you love me, then staying is definitely a commitment. Knowing that, I'd be leading you on by staying, and it would be harder to go."

"I would never hold you here if you wanted to go."

"Can I think about it?"

Her stomach fell but she smiled. "Absolutely. Can I ask you, though, do you want to stay? Deep down?"

"I…" He rubbed a hand across his face, then dropped it. "I've tried to find a place to belong before. Within my family, at boarding school, in the army… and each time it failed. This place…" He looked across at the row of cabins, and she followed his gaze to see Nell talking over her fence to Bud, and the signs of activity around them. "You've built something here, Layla, and you should be really proud of it."

Why did that feel like a no? Like the whole world was bearing down on her with a crushing weight… "But?" she managed to ask.

A deep groove appeared across his forehead. "Sometimes when I think about the town, it seems too good to be true."

"You don't trust that feeling, do you?" she asked softly, suddenly understanding, and seeing with startling clarity how impossible that made things. And how far away from her he really was.

He shrugged one shoulder. "It's never led me to happiness in the past. But I promise I'll think about it."

Layla made herself smile and nod, and then called the dogs as if her world hadn't just tilted off its axis.

*

When Jonathon leapt into Eddie's arms the next day, all the doubts and anxieties Eddie had

harbored about whether the kid would remember him fled. Eddie hadn't had much to do with children, and so had no idea if a five-year-old could remember someone they'd only seen in occasional video calls for eight months. But Jonathon had squealed "Uncle Eddie!" when they pulled up, and as soon as Eddie had crouched at the car door and released the child restraint, his nephew had thrown himself at him.

Eddie closed his arms around the small frame, trying to swallow away the lump in his throat. A hug from Matt's kid eased something deep inside him.

"Hey, Jonathon," he said as he leaned back. "I've got lots of fun stuff planned for us."

Eyes wide, the child leaned back to look at his face. "Really?"

"Cross my heart." Eddie's face split into a grin that he knew he wouldn't be able to wipe off his face if he'd tried.

"Hello, Eddie," Caroline said as she emerged from the driver's seat. Her hair was sleek caramel, and her long, maroon coat exquisitely tailored.

"Hi, Caroline. Thanks for bringing him out," Eddie said over Jonathon's shoulder, just before the kid tore himself away and ran to his mother.

"Mom, Uncle Eddie has fun stuff for me!" Jonathon gripped Caroline's legs, arching his neck to look up at her.

"Has he?" She smoothed back dark, flyaway hair from his face. "Nothing dangerous, I hope?"

Eddie raised both hands, palms out. "All perfectly safe. The last of the apples need picking, and there's a swing in a great big tree that his dad loved when he was Jonathon's age. I checked it all out and it's good to use."

Jonathon jumped and fist pumped the air. "Now?"

"Soon. How about we take your bags inside first, and get everyone something to drink?"

He glanced at Caroline who smiled. “A coffee would be great if I’m going to drive back today. Several coffees, in fact.”

“I would have come to get him,” he said quietly. But he knew why she’d declined. She wanted to see the town and make sure it was safe for her son. She wanted to see him and make sure it was safe to leave her son with him. “But since you’re here, I’ll show you around a bit, and let you meet some of the people.”

“I’d appreciate that,” she said with a nod.

He grabbed Jonathon’s suitcase and led them into his cabin. “My dog Willow is next door with her friends.”

“Can I meet her?” the kid asked as he pranced around the room.

“She can be a bit nervous around new people because she’s deaf, so I thought you might like to meet Tinkerbell first.”

Jonathon repeated the name Tinkerbell on a long breath, as if it were a one-word prayer. “Is she spotty like Willow?”

Eddie grinned. Jonathon had even remembered that Willow was a Dalmatian. “No, she has jet black fur, with white frosting around her face.”

After he made Caroline a coffee and gave Jonathon a glass of water, listening to the kid’s stream-of-consciousness chatting the whole time, he showed them around the cabin, ending at the spare bedroom that was set up for the sleepover.

“Is this mine?” Jonathon asked, bouncing on the bed.

Eddie leaned back against the doorframe and crossed his arms over his chest. “All yours for the sleepover.”

“And always when I visit?” Jonathon insisted.

Eddie’s heart clenched. The three months he’d agreed to stay was drawing to a close, which meant he couldn’t promise that Jonathon would even get one more visit to Applestead.

Unless he took up Layla's offer to stay indefinitely and see where things between them went. He wrapped a hand around the back of his neck to stave off the flood of feeling that thought always unleashed. Her question yesterday had been on a replay loop in his mind.

Why not stay? Give us a real shot at a proper relationship?

He still didn't have an answer that satisfied him. Just lots of half-formed ideas that he couldn't let himself complete or dwell on too much or he'd tear himself in two.

Jonathon bounced on the bed, letting out a battle cry every time he launched himself in the air and Eddie chuckled. Of course, Layla might not be keen for regular visits from Jonathon anyway—she seemed very worried about keeping a child safe around the dogs, especially Goliath. She'd said just that morning that any young kid around a large bunch of dogs would need a lot of supervision, and since Jonathon was Diane's only great-grandson, Layla was especially worried. If a dog accidentally scared him and he cried and told Diane, Layla was concerned that would affect Diane's assessment of their trial phase.

He wasn't worried though. Layla didn't realize how good she was with these dogs, and how her systems of which dog was allowed to socialize with which was keeping everything humming along smoothly. Protecting a child in the middle of a dog sanctuary might be a challenge, but there was no one he trusted more than Layla to pull it off. In fact, there was no one he trusted more with most things than Layla. She was an extraordinary person, glowing with determination and her vision of how the world could be. Sometimes her light shone so brightly he couldn't help but reach out and touch her.

Jonathon made a huge jump and let out his loudest yell yet, and Caroline told him it was time to hop down off the bed. Before the kid remembered the question about staying in this room always, Eddie drew his cell from his pocket. "Would you like to meet Tinkerbell?"

Jonathon gasped. "Can I?"

"You bet," he said, and sent Layla a text.

By the time they were at the front door, Layla was already walking up the path. His breath caught in his throat at the sight of her. She moved with efficient grace, her blonde hair spilling over her shoulders, her attention on Tinkerbell waddling along at her side.

Jonathon squealed at the sight of the tubby Labrador, and Tink wagged when she realized there was a kid. It was love at first sight, as if time slowed and the sun came out from behind the clouds. Within seconds, dog and child were rolling around on the grass together, Tink licking his face and Jonathon giggling and trying to tickle her. Eddie's heart expanded until it filled his chest.

He managed to drag his gaze away to introduce the two women, but they were mesmerized, watching the exhibition of joy playing out before them.

"I've never seen him react to a dog this well," Caroline said.

"Tink is special," Layla said. "She's pure love wrapped up in a dog's body."

Caroline looked along the row of cabins. "What about the other dogs?"

"Goliath is a growly Chihuahua, and we'll ensure he's kept away. There's also Billy Bob the Great Dane, who's about the same height as Jonathon, and he's very laid back. Not as joyful as Tink, but I think Jonathon will enjoy meeting him."

"And J.R.," Eddie said. "A Jack Russell cross with huge ears. He's a live wire, and hard to tire out. I thought Jonathon and I could take him for a walk this afternoon. Maybe through the sensory garden. J.R. loves all the climbing and exploring through there, and it's fun to watch. Jonathon can join in too."

"You know, J.R. is probably due for a bath," Layla said, grinning.

"Jonathon would probably love that. We could see if Billy Bob wanted one too—Jonathon is the perfect size for washing a Great Dane's belly."

Layla laughed. "Caroline, you should see the amazing grooming station Eddie built in the hotel laundry. There's a hydrobath up on a platform with a ramp leading up, a table for

blow drying and trimming nails, shelves for all the products like shampoos and ear cleaner. Everyone loves it."

Caroline listened, watching the places they were pointing, gaze drifting back to her son. "Eddie, can I ask you something personal?"

His shoulders straightened. "You're leaving your son with me overnight. Feel free to ask anything you need."

"How settled are you in this town?"

He glanced at Layla, who raised her eyebrows.

Why not stay? Give us a real shot at a proper relationship?

His heart tripped over itself, and he tore his gaze from Layla and focused back on Jonathon and Tink. It would be incredibly easy to give in and say yes, he'd stay. Layla wanted him to, and most of the time, he wanted to as well, but if he wasn't sure then he'd be setting them both up for heartache. His gaze drifted back to Layla, who was still watching him. What if he could stay? What if he simply chose to stay? Here. With Layla…

Caroline was watching him, too, waiting for an answer, so he gave her a quick smile. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm really impressed with the amount of thought you've put into this visit. And I was surprised how happy Jonathon was to see you. Since his father died, he's been missing a man in his life, and I'm starting to think that role could be filled by you. Diane has been nudging me to let Jonathon reconnect with you for a while, and I can see she was right."

Diane had been nudging her? Eddie had no idea, but he'd thank his grandmother next time he spoke to her. "I'm really pleased to hear you say that."

"Would you consider moving back to L.A.? That way you could be nearby and become a bigger part of Jonathon's life."

On Caroline's other side, Layla flinched.

This was exactly the invitation he'd been hoping for—being part of his nephew's life—that would also help him fulfill his promise to Matt. But L.A.? Thousands of miles from Layla. A few months ago, he'd have accepted without a second thought. But now…

"I'll think about it," he said. "I'll have an answer for you when you pick Jonathon up in a couple of days."

Caroline smiled, satisfied, and turned back to watch Jonathon and Tinkerbell. Layla looked at the ground. Eddie dug his hands in his pockets and hoped like hell he'd work out the right thing to do before Caroline got back.

Chapter Fourteen

The early morning sun was peeking over the horizon as Rhonda pushed her arms through the sleeves of her blue jacket. She'd already been up for half an hour, drunk her first coffee, and was ready to face the day.

"What do you think, Mr. Darcy? Fancy a walk?"

The greyhound curled his body into a tighter ball on his daytime bed and ignored her.

"Oh, come on. It looks lovely out there. Cold, I'll grant you, but the birds are out."

He tucked his nose under his front leg.

"We'll stay on the roads, so your paws don't have to touch the cold grass."

When he didn't move, Rhonda chuckled. The main tension in their relationship was that she was an early bird, and he was… well, he wasn't a night owl either. He liked to go to bed early, sleep in the next morning, and spend a lot of the day napping in the most comfortable place he could find.

"Come on, lazy bones," she said as she retrieved his striped harness from the hook on the wall. She held up one of Hank's peanut butter treats. "What if I bring a cookie along for

you to have on the way?"

That got his attention. He sniffed the air then slowly unfurled his body and sauntered over.

"Good boy," she said, opening the front door. He walked through, taking a lungful of the morning air, and then sneezed, rocking his entire body.

"Hang on," she said as she quickly kicked off her slippers and shoved a foot into a walking shoe. "I know I should have been ready for you—"

Her toe caught and buckled, and she scrabbled for her footing but there was nothing to grab and she went down hard on the tiled floor, her knee twisting as she landed. She tried to get up, but a sharp pain made her yelp. Mr. Darcy was on the other side of the door, but her clumsy maneuver had closed it, with only a small gap, and her body weight was holding it in place.

He whimpered, and she said, "It's okay," but her voice was thin and shaky.

Though, she had to admit, clearly it wasn't. She couldn't get up, and her dog was on the other side of the door, scared. That was worse than the pain in her knee. He whimpered again and she reached a hand for the gap in the door, finding his narrow snout poked through.

"You're a good boy," she said as calmly as she could, despite the panic starting to rise in her chest. "You just have to be brave for a few minutes while I work out what to do."

He cried louder and pushed at the door, shoving it into her side.

"I know this is scary, my sweet boy, but I'm right here. We'll be fine."

He barked, one sharp crack of noise, then another. Then the door started banging into her side in a rhythm of small thuds in time with the sound of his nails scraping at the other side, attempting to dig through the barrier. His confusion and fear were breaking her heart.

"Mr. Darcy," she said firmly, trying to get him to calm down. "Mr. Darcy, listen to me. I'll fix this and we'll be fine." She flexed her leg and her knee exploded in pain. She tried

to breathe through the agony, using a technique she'd learned years ago when she'd injured her wrist, but it wasn't having much effect. "You know, it doesn't look like we'll get that walk in today."

The greyhound's toenails clipped over the concrete in front of her door, then a loud, deep, "Rrrr-ooof! Rrrrrrr-oof!" came from her front yard.

"Come back, Mr. Darcy, come on," she said, not even sure if he could hear her.

"Rrrrrr-ooof. Rrrrr-ooooof."

"Mr. Darcy," she said yelled. "Come here."

At the sound of his nails on the concrete, she wiggled and managed to get her fingers out through the door gap. "Come on, boy. Sit with me while I work this out."

She heard the thud of his body as he laid down, and then his paw landed on her open palm, and tears formed in her eyes. She wrapped her fingers around his paw, as the tears squeezed out the corners of her eyes and fell down her cheeks. "You're a good boy and I don't deserve you. Just give me a few minutes for the pain to ease then I'll get up and open the door and you can spend the whole day napping."

A lick on the back of her hand made the tears fall faster and she scrubbed at them with her free hand. "To tell you the truth, I think we both might spend today napping in bed."

The latch on her front gate clanged and there was a distinctive squeak as it opened.

"Hello?" The heavily accented word floated in from the front yard. Valentina. Just when she was at her worst. "Is everything okay? I heard barking."

"I'm fine," she called back. "I just fell and am taking a minute before I get up."

"Okay," Valentina said. "How about I stay with Mr. Darcy until you do?"

It was hard to say no to that. She didn't want someone here witnessing her vulnerability, but Mr. Darcy was clearly anxious about the situation. "Perhaps you could take him for a little walk while I hop up."

There was a pause before she said, “Okay.” Her voice changed to a higher pitch. “Come on, Mr. Darcy. You want to go walkies?”

Mr. Darcy’s paw didn’t move from Rhonda’s palm. Instead, she felt his nose settle on top of her hand.

“Actually, don’t worry. He’s fine here with me. You can go on home, and I’ll see you later.”

“Are you sure?” Valentina asked.

She tried to make her voice sound chipper as she said, “One hundred percent.”

“Okay then.”

The gate latch clicked again, and Rhonda slumped back. Now to get up. She rolled to her side and a red-hot poker went through her knee. She whimpered and Mr. Darcy joined in. Perhaps if she rolled the other way?

The gate latch went again, and Rhonda dropped her head back on the floor. More onlookers.

“Rhonda?” This time it was Layla’s voice.

“Yes?” she asked, trying for an imperious tone but probably failing given that her jaw was clenched against the pain.

“Can you let me in?”

Does it look like I can let you in? she wanted to scream. Instead, she reached deep for politeness. “Not right now. I’m leaning against the door. Once I’m up I’ll welcome you all in.”

A pause and whispering on the other side. She could hear Valentina’s accent, which explained where the other woman had gone when she’d left—to get Layla.

“Rhonda,” Layla said, “I have the cabin keys here with me, and if it’s okay with you, I’m just going to let myself in the back door. I might be able to help you get up.”

Rhonda closed her eyes. Layla was right, and it was only her stupid pride stopping her getting some help.

"Okay," she said, resigned. "Take Mr. Darcy with you."

Ten minutes later, Valentina had roped in Eddie and Hank to help Rhonda up onto the sofa. Eddie was on the floor with Jonathon while Layla looked at her knee.

To keep herself distracted from the pain, she'd been watching Eddie and Layla. There was something new between those two. It could just be that Eddie was focused on Jonathon, but he and Layla seemed awkward in each other's company. Eddie was trying extra hard to be pleasant, and Layla was stealing glances at him when she thought no one was watching. Perhaps they'd had a fight.

Layla stepped around Mr. Darcy, who was lying up against the sofa and refusing to budge, and gently lifted Rhonda's leg up onto a pillow, and placed a bag of ice against the side. She said her veterinary nurse training wasn't especially helpful but could see there was a lot of swelling and suggested calling an ambulance.

Rhonda began to protest that the ice and some strapping would do the trick, but Valentina whipped out her phone and called 911 before she could stop her.

While they waited for the ambulance, the small crowd entertained themselves, chatting and pretending it was a party—likely thinking they were keeping her spirits up when in fact they were annoying her. When they arrived, the paramedics were pleasant enough, but they suggested taking her to the hospital for x-rays.

"No need," Rhonda said. She hated a fuss at the best of times, and with the pain and stress, she just wanted to be left alone. "If you could just strap it since you're here, I'd appreciate it."

The older paramedic, a man with a shaved head and deep brown skin, gave her a sympathetic smile. "If there's a break, we need to know."

"I can't go in an ambulance," she said, waving away the idea. "Mr. Darcy needs me."

"I'll look after Mr. Darcy," Layla said.

Rhonda met the paramedic's encouraging, patient gaze, and her shoulders slumped as she gave up. The man was right, and she was being stubborn.

She turned to Layla. "He needs his dinner warmed. Not too hot, just lukewarm. Since he hasn't had his breakfast yet, he'll need that after I go, and when you have yours, he gets a corner of toast, with a dollop of peanut paste. He hates going out for a walk, but once he gets going he enjoys the smells, which means you have to encourage him. Sometimes one of Hank's treats works," she said with a slight nod to Hank, who grinned. "If I don't get back tonight, he likes to do his business after dinner, then again just before bed, and then he spends his night up on your bed, so you'd better be willing to let him sleep there. He likes his knitted pajamas on all day, but I take them off for a couple of hours in the middle of the day when it's warm. Don't let him convince you that they stay on all day."

Layla smiled. "I promise to follow the instructions faithfully."

"I will pack you a bag," Valentina said as she stood.

Rhonda opened her mouth to say don't go through my things, but realized she would need a few items if they kept her overnight and she couldn't get them herself. So, instead, she swallowed her pride and said, "I'd appreciate it."

Valentina's face lit up with a smile and she headed through to the bedroom, as the paramedics wheeled in a gurney and started getting her ready for transport.

Rhonda looked around at the assorted people and realized with surprise that she was looking forward to coming back.

She leaned down and stroked Mr. Darcy's velvet ears and looked into his huge eyes. "You be a good boy," she whispered. "I'll be back soon." Because there was an audience, she only silently added I love you but Mr. Darcy seemed to know anyway and touched his nose to

her cheek.

*

The next day, Layla smiled and Mr. Darcy whined as they watched Applestead welcome Rhonda home from hospital. Valentina and Nell had left early to pick her up, and Autumn, Hank, and Alberto had banded together to make everything perfect for her arrival. Mr. Darcy had been staying with Layla and Autumn, along with Willow, Zeb, and Doris. Thankfully Bud had been regularly taking one or two dogs for walks during the day so Layla's cabin didn't feel too crowded.

Eddie had been busy with Jonathon, so Layla hadn't seen much of him, and hadn't been alone with him at all to ask his thoughts on Caroline's offer. When she'd agreed to help him meet his goal of becoming part of Jonathon's life, she hadn't realized the potential cost. She was desperate to ask him what he was thinking, to find out if he'd already decided to leave, but she'd already made her position clear. Now it was up to him.

Naturally, she'd dissected the situation from every angle late at night with Autumn. The midnight margaritas had flowed, but they hadn't found any satisfying answers.

As Valentina's car rolled to a stop, the waiting crowd cheered. Nell was out quickly and handed Rhonda her new crutches, but Hank and Alberto hoisted her up between them, joined hands at her back and underneath her thighs.

"There's no need for this," Rhonda said, though she was clearly suppressing a smile. "I have crutches."

"Save your strength," Alberto said as they carried her into the house and gently deposited her on the sofa.

Mr. Darcy whined louder and moved his weight from foot to foot. Once Rhonda was settled with her strapped knee up on a pillow, Layla released the greyhound and he ran straight for the sofa and sniffed his person all over, tail wagging at superspeed, then leapt on

top of her, wedging himself between her and the back of the sofa.

Rhonda grunted and Hank moved to get him down, but Layla saw the expression on Rhonda's face, and held up a hand to stay Hank.

"There you are," Rhonda said, cupping Mr. Darcy's long, narrow face between both hands. She glanced at Layla. "Was he much trouble?"

"He spent most of the time watching the door, waiting for you. Bud took him on some walks, but I think he only went in case he caught sight of you. And he wouldn't eat anything, so he's probably very hungry."

"As soon as he can bear to tear himself away, I'll give him something to eat," Nell said. "But for now, I'll make you that coffee you were craving."

"Speaking of something to eat," Hank said, "we've stocked your fridge with cooked meals, but we'll also be dropping over each day to bring you food."

Alberto held up a finger. "And before you say that's not necessary—of course it's not. But we're going to do it anyway."

Rhonda opened her mouth as if to reply, then closed it again. Layla grinned, enjoying the interaction.

Bud stepped forward. "It would be my honor to take Mr. Darcy on his walks. We've almost become friends while you were away, and I'm getting to know some of the places he likes to sniff. You can think of it as continuing to build our relationship."

From the kitchen, Nell called over her shoulder, "I'll be doing all your washing up, sweeping, or any other household chores."

"You all make it sound like I'm at death's door," Rhonda said, but her eyes glistened with tears.

Valentina stepped forward. "And, like we talked about in the car, I will help with the things the nurses said you would need. Set your clothes out on the bed, be here in the other

room while you shower in case you fall."

"I…" Rhonda said, then, "Thank you."

There was a knock at the door. When Layla opened it, Eddie stood in the doorway, holding Jonathon's hand. Her stomach somersaulted. There were lines of worry around his eyes, and the dark smudges beneath them told her he hadn't slept well the last couple of nights when she hadn't shared his bed. Everything inside her yearned to reach for his other hand, to reach for him, but she had no idea how things stood between them now. So she pasted a smile on her face and welcomed them inside.

"This little guy," Eddie said, swinging their joined hands, "wanted to see Aunty Rhonda and make sure she was okay. We waited until there was a break in the commotion, so we didn't add to it."

Rhonda waved, with one hand still on Mr. Darcy's head. "Of course I'm okay. Ask Valentina to get you a cookie from the tin on top of the fridge."

Jonathon's eyes lit up and Valentina laughed, then called him to follow her.

"While he's occupied with cookies," Eddie said, voice strained, "do you have a moment for a quick word?"

Nerves on edge, Layla followed him out into the little yard in front of Rhonda's cabin.

He dug his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. Not the kind of body language that screamed I want to stay with you forever. Her bottom lip trembled and she bit down on it, trying to retain some sense of control.

"I'd rather discuss this in a better place." He glanced around. "A better time. But Caroline will be here soon and—"

"It's fine," she said, cutting him off. Everyone was inside, so there was privacy, and she didn't want to wait, or be blindsided when he announced his decision to Caroline. "Just say what you need to."

"I've been thinking about what you suggested that day at Willow's Garden."

"About giving us a shot and seeing if we could make a real relationship work," she supplied because she had a feeling he was going to skim over as much as he could, and she wanted everything on the table.

"Yeah, that. I've thought about it a lot." He met her eyes briefly, his own filled with anguish, then looked out over the park. "A lot. And part of me really wants to stay."

Her stomach dropped hard. "Not the bigger part, clearly."

"It's that invitation from Caroline." He offered an apologetic smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I really didn't think I'd get a chance to be part of Matt's son's life. I thought I'd be on the periphery."

She nodded as if they were discussing what to have for lunch, not something that was ripping her heart out. "I know that promise to him is important to you."

"Having him here for a few days has shown me that I need to be part of his life." He drew a deep breath. "I'm going to move to L.A. to be near him, and since Caroline's picking him up this afternoon, I have to give her my answer. I wanted you to know first."

That was that then. She should graciously accept his decision, wish him well, and walk away. It was the proper response in such circumstances, she knew, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. After all the lies and half-truths, the fakery and pretending, she needed the end of their relationship, at least, to be grounded in truth.

"It's not just Jonathon, though, is it?" she said, her voice remarkably even under the circumstances. "You weren't sure about staying even before Caroline arrived."

He ran a finger around the collar of his shirt. "It's not that I don't want to…"

"It is, though. If you wanted to, you would have said that when I asked you. You're scared."

His head snapped up. "Scared?"

"Terrified. You think if you try again to find a place to belong, to open your heart to me, and it fails, then you'll be hurt. But, news flash, Eddie, to care, to love, is to risk. You can't have one without the other. And you can't find enough courage to love."

He scowled. "If that were true, then I wouldn't be uprooting my life and moving across the country."

"Uprooting?" she repeated, incredulous. "Tell me what roots you have here. Or anywhere for that matter."

"I'm doing it to find a place in Jonathon's life. That's exactly what you're accusing me of avoiding."

"If that doesn't work, you can walk away. I bet you even have an exit plan worked out already that will let Jonathon down easy."

He shifted, but his gaze didn't waver. "Having a Plan B is responsible. The military taught me that before you start a campaign you need an exit strategy."

"But we're not talking about a campaign. We're talking about your life and your heart. If you have one foot out the door all the time, then you're never committed."

Before he could reply, he suddenly turned, and she followed his gaze to a black town car coming down the access road.

"That's not Caroline's car," he said.

Layla groaned. She was not in the mood for a random visitor right now. The car drew near, and Layla recognized a very familiar face through the windshield…

"Oh no," she whispered and took a step backwards. "No, no, no, no, no."

Eddie frowned as he looked from her to the car and back again. "Who is it?"

"The very last person in the world that I want to see right now." She rubbed her temples, trying to think fast, as the car cruised to a stop in front of Rhonda's cabin. "My mother."

A choked sound from beside her brought her attention back to Eddie.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked.

“Go inside and get Bud. Hide him. And do not let anyone else out here until I get rid of her.”

“About that,” he said. “It might be too late.”

She turned and saw a small crowd at the door. Hank, Alberto, Nell, and Autumn, stood with Valentina who was holding Jonathon’s hand. And at the front of them all was Bud, his face frozen.

Chapter Fifteen

As her mother's car drew near, Layla stood on the soft, green verge, desperately trying to come up with a new plan.

"Bud," she said. "Why don't you go back inside and make a cup of tea?"

"She's seen me," he said, sounding miserable. "She won't leave now until she talks to me."

"Who is it?" Valentina asked.

Hank stepped in front of Bud. "If you're worried about this person, I'll talk to her."

"Bud," Layla said again, but before she could get the rest of the words out, he interrupted.

"Layla, why don't you and I talk to this random woman that we don't know who's unexpectedly arrived in our town?" He walked over and stood at her side and waved the others away. "Everyone else can go inside now. We'll be back in soon."

The car stopped and her mother cut the engine.

Alberto moved beside them and drew himself to his full height and Layla was

reminded for the first time of his past as a police officer. “I’m not going anywhere if there’s a threat to someone in this town.”

“She’s not as much a threat,” Layla said, “as—”

The woman herself got out of the car and raced around to them. She’d always been tiny—coming just past Layla’s shoulder—but she seemed even smaller somehow. Her face was as beautiful as ever. Layla had spent much of her teen years wishing for her mother’s perfect cheekbones, pert nose, and heart-shaped face. Unfortunately, she’d taken after her father.

“Thank god I found you both.” Her mother gripped Bud in a tight hug then released him. “I’ve been driving around this godforsaken backwater for hours, looking for the turnoff, and—” She grabbed Layla and squeezed before letting her go and standing back. “—was starting to believe I had the wrong directions.”

There was silence and Layla scrambled to think of something to say that could avert the disaster that was looming. Her mother was a speeding train approaching through the tunnel, and Layla needed to get off the tracks.

“Layla?” she asked. “Thomas?”

“Thomas?” Valentina repeated then turned to Layla. “Who is this woman?”

Layla squared her shoulders and met the train head-on. “My mother.”

Alberto frowned. “I thought you said your parents were dead?”

“Dead?” her mother said, then laughed. She linked elbows with Bud. “As you can see, Layla’s parents are very much alive.”

“Bud?” Hank said slowly. “You’re…”

Bud disentangled his arm from his ex-wife’s, raised his chin and steeled himself as if against a blow. “My name is Thomas and I’m Layla’s father.”

Hank, Alberto, Nell, and Valentina turned almost in unison, their eyes moving from

Bud to Layla. Eddie edged closer, coming to stand at her elbow.

Alberto was the first to break the silence. “Why would you lie about your parents’ deaths?”

“Well—” Layla began.

“What’s going on out there?” Rhonda called from inside the house.

Valentina took a couple of steps to the side and yelled through the window. “Bud is Layla’s dad.”

“He’s not dead?”

“He’s standing in front of us,” Valentina called, watching Bud like a specimen.

“Well, who just arrived?”

“Her mother.”

“Why don’t you people come in here so I can hear this conversation firsthand?” Rhonda yelled, her tone exasperated.

“Hang on a minute,” Layla said, trying very hard to keep it together. If she could get her parents alone, she could deal with her mother and make her leave. Then she’d explain the details to everyone else.

Eddie looked up sharply. From a distance, the sound of a helicopter floated on the breeze, gradually becoming louder.

“Heli-chopter!” Jonathon called as he came running from Rhonda’s cabin.

Eddie grabbed Jonathon’s hand and used his other hand to shield his own eyes as he tracked the chopper’s progress. It came closer and the sound grew to a dull roar before hovering directly above Applestead then slowly descending to land on the large park.

In the front yards, dogs were going berserk. Some of the crowd dashed back to calm them and bring them out to the security of the gathered crowd, and by the time the helicopter touched down, the number had swelled to include all the dogs except Mr. Darcy, who

remained inside with Rhonda.

Zeb ran to Layla, fussing to check she was okay, and Willow gave the same treatment to Eddie. Autumn had Rafaela on a leash, and was pushing Doris's stroller, but Bud sprinted down to take the stroller and talk calmingly to Doris, who was as unaffected as ever. Valentina cradled a confused and anxious Goliath in her arms, and led J.R., who stopped to mark the tires of the town car. Alberto brought Billy Bob and Tink, both of whom seemed happy to be included in whatever social occasion was happening on the street—weaving through the crowd, greeting humans and dogs. Nell carried Princess, who was trembling, and Hank rushed over to scoop up Crystal, allowing Nell to also carry Burrito in her other arm.

"Nan-nan!" Jonathon jumped up and down as Diane stepped from the helicopter, ducking her head as she dashed free of the sweep of the slowing rotors. Then a second woman poked her head out and Jonathon squealed. "Mommy!"

"We'll wait an extra minute," Eddie said, holding Jonathon's hand against the five-year-old's tugging.

Diane and Caroline crossed the park and once they reached the edge of the road, Eddie let Jonathon go. He bolted and threw himself at his mother, who scooped him up and hugged him tight.

Diane stopped in front of the crowd and pushed her sunglasses to the top of her head. "Well, this is a first-rate greeting. Layla, do you want to introduce me to the people I don't know?"

Layla's knees wobbled. She hadn't finished dealing with her mother, and now Diane was here. She'd have to work out a plan as she went, think on her feet.

"This is Valentina," she said, pointing, "and Hank, and Alberto, and Nell, and Bud, and…" she hesitated in front of her mother. She'd told Diane that her parents were dead, and she'd also watched her mother's eyes widen at Diane's obvious wealth, from landing in a

helicopter to shaking the sparkling gold bangles at her wrist. “Er, this is Jill.”

Diane nodded at each in turn as they were introduced. “Lovely to meet you all.”

“This is unexpected,” Eddie said, giving his grandmother a hug.

She squeezed him tight, then held him at arm’s length for a beat as she looked him over. Satisfied, she patted his cheek and stepped back. “I had a notification about Rhonda’s health insurance, which surprised me since no one told me Rhonda was in hospital. I flew out as soon as I could. Is she back yet?”

“Yes.” Valentina adjusted Goliath in her arms and was rewarded with a full-toothed snarl. “I drove her back and we arrived only about an hour ago.”

Diane smiled widely. “Then lead me to her, please, Valentina.”

Layla let out a sigh of relief that she’d made it through the introductions, at least, without her mother’s identity being blown. Now to get her to leave before Diane finished with Rhonda.

Her mother sidled over and looped her elbow through Layla’s, dragging Bud with her. “This is a sweet set-up,” she whispered.

“Please, don’t—” Layla began in the same hushed tones.

“What’s my role?” she said. “You know I’m good with the rich ones.”

Four paces ahead, Diane stiffened, then slowly turned on the spot. “I beg your pardon?” Her voice was pure ice and Layla felt it all the way to her bones.

Without missing a beat, her mother stepped forward and stuck out her hand. “Hi, I’m—”

“Jill,” Bud supplied, but looked miserable doing it.

“—Jill. Sorry I didn’t introduce myself already, I was just so excited to be reunited with my family—you know how it is. I look forward to getting to know you and all these delightful dogs.” She beamed at Diane, even flashing the dimples that usually closed any

deal.

Layla grabbed her elbow and tried to pull her back, despite knowing it was too late.

"Tell me," Diane said, baring her teeth in a semblance of a smile, "what, exactly, is your connection to Layla?"

Layla wasn't sure if it was her imagination or if all the Applestead residents had collectively taken one step back. She wouldn't blame them if they had—her gut was telling her to do the same. Zeb leaned closer.

"Caroline," Layla said, "why don't you take Jonathon into that cabin to see Rhonda and Mr. Darcy?"

Caroline looked around at the group with open curiosity but nodded and led Jonathon inside.

Once they'd left, Layla squared her shoulders. "Diane, I need to explain something. And to apologize. These people—"

Bud stepped up beside her, pushing Doris's stroller ahead of him. "I am Layla's father. I showed up unannounced and pleaded with Layla to let me stay. She kindly and temporarily took me in. This woman," he gestured to 'Jill', "is my ex-wife. She does not live here. She arrived about half an hour ago and was about to leave."

It was only the truth, and what Layla would have said herself, but everything inside her twisted painfully as her dreams crumbled before her eyes.

"Darling," Jill said, cozying up to Bud and oozing charm. "Now I'm here, we—"

Layla's head began to swim, but she forced herself to think so she could salvage what she could. "Mom, it's time you left." She waved an arm at the car. "Have a good trip."

Zeb let out a low growl and laid down on the grass in front of Layla, alert and determined.

All pretense of charm fell away, and Jill's beautiful face filled with annoyance. "Fine.

Thomas, get in the car. We're going."

"No," he said tentatively, holding the stroller's handle with a white-knuckled grip.

"We don't have time for this. Get in the car, Thomas."

He shot Layla a panicked glance and she really didn't want to get between her parents, but she stepped forward anyway. "He's staying."

"Layla, sweetheart," her mother said with deliberate patience, "this is between your father and me."

Alberto, who'd been watching proceedings quietly at the side, stepped in front of Bud with Billy Bob and Tinkerbell, effectively blocking him. "The man said no."

Billy Bob whined pathetically, tail tucked just inside his back legs, probably wishing he was back inside on his comfy bed. Jill's gaze flicked to the Great Dane and she swallowed, suddenly looking nervous.

Hank, carrying Crystal, and Valentina, holding Goliath, stepped up beside Bud, shoulder to shoulder on either side of him. Eddie moved up to stand with Alberto, in front of the others, Willow walked in step with her human, then plonked her butt down at his feet. Autumn and Rafaela joined the group, followed by Nell, still cradling Princess and Burrito. They formed a tight bunch, blocking even a line of sight between her parents. The dogs were tense, leaning into the arms or legs of their people, watchful, waiting. Even Billy Bob seemed to have picked up on the vibe.

A look of surprise and then hurt flashed across Jill's features. "Thomas, you're acting like you're scared of me."

Bud turned to Layla, brows drawn together, seeking reassurance. Layla smiled and nodded at him.

He leaned around his protective wall and called out. "No, I'm scared of me. That I'll get caught up in schemes again if I go with you. That I'll end up back in jail."

"Don't be ridiculous," Jill said, waving that away with a sweep of her hand. "We'll be fine. We're always fine."

He scratched his ear at the side of the baseball cap then adjusted the cap to sit squarely again. "I'm staying here and I'm going to be Bud from now on. I'm going to look after Doris and be nice to people and run the hotel to help raise money for Layla's sanctuary. I'm a good person now. I've made a new start." He glanced at the other residents forming his protective wall. "Here, with these people."

Frowning, Jill looked to Layla then back to Bud peeking from behind the group. "You're serious."

"Completely," Bud said, straightening his spine.

"Okay." Jill blew out a long breath, her shoulders sagging. "Whatever. See you around, Layla." She crossed the verge to her car, and, with only a brief glance over her shoulder, Jill climbed into the driver's seat and left.

The dogs relaxed—except Goliath, who was giving the stink eye to as many humans and dogs as he could—and the people spread out a little and encircled Bud.

"Thank you," he said, his voice breaking. "I know I don't deserve your support after lying to you, but I appreciate it more than I can say."

Hank clapped him on the back with his free hand. "You're one of us now, Bud."

Bud wiped his eyes and looked at the ground, but he was smiling.

"While we're talking about future plans," Autumn said, "I have an announcement too. I'm going to move to Applestead, if Layla will have me. And I will make it my personal mission to make the financial side work. I'll follow up grants and donations and bequests and whatever it takes."

"That is marvelous," Valentina exclaimed.

Hank offered a high five, and Nell said, “Welcome,” over her armful of white fluffy dogs.

“Hang on a minute,” Diane said, her voice cutting through. “I think someone needs to fill me in. I seem to have missed a few steps.”

Layla swung around to see Diane standing behind them, arms crossed, brow furrowed. For a few minutes, Layla had totally forgotten about Diane’s presence. Which was bad, since the future of the sanctuary entirely depended on this woman…

“Me too,” Rhonda called from inside the cabin.

“Give us a moment,” Hank said. He handed Crystal to Layla, and Alberto handed Billy Bob and Tink’s leashes to Eddie, then they headed into the cabin. Alberto ducked out carrying a dining chair that he put down in the middle of the yard, then within a couple of minutes, they emerged with Rhonda supported between them and gently deposited her on the chair. Caroline and Jonathon trailed behind, holding hands. Jonathon pulled free and trotted to where Tinkerbell was sprawled in the sunshine. The adults looked at Diane, expectantly.

Diane gestured to Layla, her gold bangles jangling with the movement. “You have the floor. Well, the lawn.”

Layla swallowed. She glanced at Eddie and he gave her a smile and came to stand beside her.

“I was born Layla Landingham. My parents are Thomas,” she waved at Bud, “and Andrea Landingham. Eight years ago they were found guilty of defrauding a charity and sent to jail. I was eighteen years old. Our house was repossessed, and all I owned fit in my suitcase. I moved from Georgia to Boston, changing my last name and my hair color, trained as a veterinary nurse, and started a new life.”

“Sweetie.” Diane’s face softened. “I knew that.”

Layla blinked. “You did?”

"What I didn't know," Diane said, "and what disappoints me, is that your father had moved in here. My private investigator said you'd broken contact with both parents. And I have to tell you, this development makes me question your judgement."

Eddie stepped forward. "She has impeccable judgement. She might have lied about this but she's an honest person."

Seeing him attempt to defend her was touching, though this was her fight. She took an extra step, bringing herself shoulder to shoulder with Eddie again, but Diane was still watching Eddie, head cocked to the side.

"Like the story about your relationship?"

Eddie winced. "That was my idea, and I had to talk her into it. You can't blame her."

"I'll tell you what I see," Diane said, one perfectly formed eyebrow arched. "You talked her into pretending to date you when she thought it was a bad idea. Then Bud here talked her into letting him stay against her better judgement. And I arrived in the middle of her mother trying to talk her into God knows what. That, my friends, is a pattern."

Layla flinched at the accusation. She couldn't deny any of it.

"It looks like you've done a lot of good work here, Layla. But I'm sorry, I think I need to pull the plug."

There were gasps from the group, and Layla felt the world wobble. She'd been expecting it since the moment her mother had asked what the con was. No, before that, which meant she'd had time to prepare. And now was the time to do something. To fix it. That's what she did—she was a fixer. But her body and mind were in too many pieces, none connected with each other, some floating away. Nothing happening around her seemed real. She'd lost Eddie and now the dog sanctuary.

"Gran," Eddie said, his arm sliding around Layla's waist. "This is not fair."

Diane was rigid, as if bracing for the backlash. "I can't tell you how much I'd hoped

you'd make a go of this project. You know that I'd planned to retire out here myself with Persephone." She looked down at Goliath and when she lifted her chin again, the lines around her eyes betrayed her exhaustion, her heartbreak. "I really am sorry, Layla. The leader of something this big needs to be firm in their own decisions and follow their moral compass. If I can't trust you to do that, then I can't trust you with these assets."

Despite the wave of nausea that rolled over her, Layla pulled herself together and bound the pieces tight. Then she found her center and met Diane's gaze. "You have the power to pull the plug, no question. But, please, will you at least sleep on it? Stay one night and have a proper look around at what we've built here together before you make your final decision?"

Diane looked across at her chopper, her means of escape.

"Gran," Eddie said. "Please."

She turned to Layla and sighed. "Okay, I'll give you one night. But you're only delaying the inevitable."

Layla nodded, feeling the first glimmer of hope since her mother's car had come into town. "Noted."

"Caroline," Diane said, "do you and Jonathon want to take the helicopter back? I don't want to hold you up."

"If you're sure you don't mind, that would be great."

"Noooo," Jonathon said from his spot on the ground, lying against a snoring Tinkerbell. "I wanna stay with Eddie and Tink."

Eddie scooped him up. "But you get to fly in the helicopter. That's pretty amazing."

"Yes!" Jonathon pumped his little fists into the air.

"Good choice." Eddie turned to Caroline. "Let's grab his stuff from my place and we can talk."

Diane pulled her sunglasses off her head to cover her eyes. “And I’d better chat to the pilot about coming back to get me tomorrow, and make some calls about Persephone’s care for tonight.”

Layla watched the group disperse, Eddie likely telling Caroline he’d move to L.A, with them, Diane organizing her ride home in the morning for after she’d confirmed she was reclaiming Applestead. The other residents headed back to their cabins with their assorted dogs, throwing Layla worried glances.

They didn’t have to worry. Layla might not be able to keep Eddie in her life, but she’d convince Diane to let them keep the sanctuary going, for the dogs and for the residents who’d risked too much. She just had to find the way to do it.

*

Layla spent the afternoon showing Diane around the changes they’d made to the town, starting with Willow’s Garden, and then Alberto and Nell’s vegetable patch. She also introduced Diane to every single dog—she wasn’t above emotional manipulation when it came to the dogs’ futures. Hank and Alberto had cooked dinner for everyone, but the conversation around the table had been strained. Diane had been polite through it all—though she’d let a genuine smile slip through when she met Goliath. She’d asked about his belly band for the incontinence and found his growls charming.

After Diane called it a day, Layla headed for Rhonda’s cabin to check on the patient. At the front gate she ran into her father, strolling in the early evening moonlight, hands in his pockets, whistling a tune.

“Baby girl,” he said with a wide grin, “thank you to the moon and back for letting me live here. Now I’m free of your mother, I promise I’m going to throw myself into running the hotel and make a success of it. You’ll see.”

She wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry about Bud having a new lease on life just

when the new life was about to be dismantled.

"Dad, you realize there's a good chance—an almost certain chance—that Diane is going to take this town back and we'll all have to move out?"

"Details!" He waved an arm comically, in a way that used to make her laugh. The thing was, she'd been a kid then, and now his dismissiveness seemed a little sad. Had he always been this cavalier about consequences? Or just oblivious?

"Actually," she said with all the patience she could muster, "it's a little thing that the rest of us like to call reality."

He shrugged. "You'll fix it. You always do."

He kissed her cheek and continued with both his whistled tune and his evening stroll, leaving Layla watching his retreating back, unsure what to do. If the sanctuary closed, was he her responsibility now? She unlatched the gate and vowed to work out what to do about him later.

When she stepped inside Rhonda's cabin, she found her comfortable on the sofa with her leg on pillows and Mr. Darcy stretched out on a bed in front of the sofa. Valentina sat on the armchair, clearly settled in. It looked like she'd interrupted a conversation.

"Layla," Valentina said. "Come in! Would you like a glass of wine? Since Rhonda is not allowed one with the drugs she is taking, it will be just you and me."

Drugs… Perhaps the painkillers were the reason why Rhonda appeared relaxed in a social situation.

"Thanks, but no to the wine," she said. "I'm not staying long. Just wanted to check on Rhonda and see if there's anything I can do."

"I'm all good," Rhonda said, snuggling deeper into the sofa. "Bud came earlier and walked Mr. Darcy, and Nell made me a cup of tea, and then cleaned up the kitchen. And now my new friend is keeping us company, isn't she, Mr. Darcy?" She dropped her hand over the

edge of the sofa and the greyhound lifted his long snout to meet her halfway.

"That's great. I'll leave you to it."

"Why don't you stay?" Rhonda asked.

The room with two friends on sofas and a dog on the floor was so appealing that she almost accepted. "I'm afraid I'm not very good company right now. I'll only bring your party down."

"Of course, you're sad," Rhonda said. "Even more reason to stay."

Valentina scooted over and patted the spot beside her. "Sit with us for a few minutes and tell us how you're taking the news."

She still had other things she needed to do, but she really did want to sit for a moment and unwind a little after a chaotic day, and their smiles were welcoming. Besides, she needed to start apologizing to the people she'd let down, and there was no time like the present.

She sank into the spot on the sofa and sighed. "I'm deeply sorry."

Rhonda frowned. "What for?"

"You both—everyone here—packed up your lives to move to Applestead, and I've ruined it. I'm more sorry than I can say."

"Nonsense," Valentina said. "You gave me a fabulous adventure."

It was a sweet thing to say, and Layla appreciated the attempt. "But now you have to move back with your daughter and her family."

"That part is sad," she agreed. "But if you hadn't invited me here, I would be with them anyway. Instead, I had a holiday and made new friends."

Rhonda nodded. "Same goes for me. Though when I return, I'd like to adopt Mr. Darcy."

The greyhound lifted his head to the sound of his name and was rewarded with Rhonda's hand stroking his ears.

Layla grinned. “It’s pretty safe to say that he’d love that.”

“But it’s not over yet,” Rhonda said. “You got Diane to stay a night, which was clever. She’s a pragmatic woman, but she’s big on family and community, and now she has a chance to see more of what you’ve achieved here.”

Diane had clearly only agreed to stay to soften the blow, which made it hard to share that optimism.

“She’s going to say no,” Layla admitted. “I lied about several things, and I had Bud here. She’s going to cancel our agreement. I failed.” She’d desperately wanted it, but she’d failed, and she couldn’t even blame Diane because they had been her own choices.

“Speaking of the lies,” Rhonda said, “how did lying about dating Eddie help?”

The thought of Eddie made her chest tighten. “It didn’t really. He wanted a way to show Diane that he was fine, and in exchange for my cooperation, he said he’d stay longer and do the odd jobs to help get us set up.”

Rhonda’s jaw dropped. “It was Eddie’s idea?”

Idea? Layla snorted. That made it sound like he’d thought of it and brought the plan to her for consideration.

“What else is there?” Valentina asked. “There’s something else.”

She settled back into the sofa. “He told Diane we were dating while I was in Boston. I didn’t find out about our fake relationship until I got back the next day.”

Rhonda’s eyebrows rose. “And I was worried you were conning him! I should have been watching him more.”

“No, everyone watching him was the reason he made the story up to start with. He’s got stuff going on in his head, but he’s fine, really.”

“Fine, but leaving?”

Layla’s stomach burned. “Fine, but leaving.”

"I don't buy it," Valentina said, putting her empty wine glass down on the coffee table with a soft thud.

Layla frowned. Had Valentina zoned out while she'd explained? "You don't have to buy it anymore. We were pretending. We were never actually dating."

"Exactly," Valentina said. "That's the part that I don't buy."

"I'm pretty certain. I was there when we made the plan."

Valentina gave a quick shake of her head. "There is something real between you. I saw it from the start. You can lie to yourselves and each other, but I see it. I see how you feel."

Layla closed her eyes for a long second. The worst part was that the other woman was right. Layla's feelings were real. She loved him. But he'd never said it back, and he'd made his choice.

"It doesn't matter. He's leaving."

"Not if we can find a way to save the sanctuary," Valentina insisted.

"Even then." Layla focused on the floor rug, unable to meet the other women's eyes as she revealed the painful truth. "Caroline asked him to move to L.A. and be a part of Jonathon's life. Even before Diane arrived, he'd decided to say yes."

Valentina's face dropped. "Oh."

Layla abruptly stood. She'd brought their party down, as she'd predicted—shared the misery when she should have been strong enough to refuse the invitation.

"Anyway, I'd better get going. There are a few things I need to do tonight. I'll see you both in the morning." She crossed the room and slipped out the door into the night as fast as she could.

Chapter Sixteen

Eddie was packing his suitcases when his grandmother arrived. He usually liked to travel light, but he'd accumulated a few things during his time in Applestead, which left him standing over the three bags as they sat open on the sofas, trying to work out how he'd could fit everything in. Willow and Zeb sat together at attention, both looking anxious about the unusual activity. Or maybe it was his mood. He wanted to move to L.A.—spending time with Jonathon had made him more certain of that. So why did it feel like the whole world was pressing down on him, robbing him of light and air?

His grandmother knocked as she opened the door and peeked her head around the gap. "Have a moment for your favorite grandmother?"

"Sure," he said. "Want a drink?"

"I don't suppose you have any whiskey?"

He chuckled. "I do, actually."

He found the bottle, poured them both a shot then handed her one.

She raised it and clinked it to his glass. "To dogs and women."

"Why not? To dogs and women." He pulled out a dining chair for her, then dropped into one across the table from her. "How did you know?"

"Know what, darling?" she asked, hands wrapped around her glass.

"That I wasn't really dating Layla? Did Rhonda work it out and tell you?"

"Ah." She leaned back in her chair. "I knew from the call when you randomly and unconvincingly announced it."

She'd known from the start? Through all the foolish updates he'd given her? He swore under his breath and she laughed.

"Why didn't you say?"

Her eyes twinkled. "A fake girlfriend is the same as a sobriety companion. To be convincing to the others, she'd have to be close enough to keep an eye on you."

Huh. He took a sip of his drink. "That tracks."

"Though, if you'll excuse some uncharacteristic nosiness—" she paused while he snorted a laugh "—there's more to your relationship with Layla now."

He sipped the whiskey. "We got close." Such an understatement for how he felt about her, but all he could bring himself to admit, to his grandmother or to himself.

"Then why are you walking away?"

"You're the one closing the place down," he said pointedly, hoping she'd bite and they could change the subject.

"Caroline told me what she'd asked you, and I take it from the way you were talking as she left that you accepted."

"I have. It's the best thing for everyone." It was the one thing he was sure of in the mess that was his life.

"Best for you? Best for Layla?"

His heart thumped hard as his mind filled with images of Layla—kissing him in the

morning, laughing at Zeb and Willow's antics, her hair sprawled over his pillow, in the garden asking him to stay… "Jonathon is a kid, and he should be the priority."

Her gaze was shrewd. "What am I missing?"

"Can't an uncle just be concerned about his nephew?"

"That part makes my heart sing. But there was something else in your eyes when you said it."

He glanced down and saw a layer of dog hair on his shirt and brushed at it with the back of his hand. "It doesn't matter."

"Indulge me." She arched an eyebrow. "You know I won't let this drop now I know there's something to tell."

He rubbed a hand down his face. That was true. She'd pester until she knew. Besides, since he'd talked it through with Layla, he'd been thinking that it might be time to tell someone else in the family. Someone else who'd loved his brother.

"The night Matt died," he began, but his throat was suddenly too dry. He finished the whiskey. "He called me."

She stilled, eyes wide. "That is not what I was expecting." She took a sip of her own drink. "What did he say."

"Not a lot. There was a coldness to his voice, like he was too calm, and he told me what he was going to do. But I was too far away, and Matt said he wasn't at home—I didn't even know what city he was in, so there was no point calling the police. I rang Dad and he said he'd try and track him down, but afterwards I found he hadn't. I tried to talk him out of it, Gran, I really did."

She sprang out of her chair and came around to sit beside him, taking his cold hands between hers. "No one would doubt that, my darling."

"We didn't talk long before he disconnected, but he asked me to take care of

Jonathon. And I promised." He wrenched a hand away from hers to swipe at his eyes. "If I have a chance to fulfill that promise, I have to take it."

"Why haven't you told anyone this before?" she asked gently.

"When I got back, I found that no one else had heard from Matt before he died, Caroline was distraught that he hadn't even left her a note. It seemed cruel at the time to tell her that he'd called the brother he didn't even like very much. I saw Dad and he agreed that Caroline was too upset, and it would be better not to add to her grief. And the longer it went on, the harder it got, because then I'd been lying by omission."

"Edward, I'm deeply sorry you've been carrying this around."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

Willow padded over and sat beside his chair, hooking her neck over his thigh. He rested a hand at the back of her head, grateful for her calm, accepting presence.

"If you only take one thing from this conversation, I want it to be this." His grandmother waited until he met her gaze again. "You can't try to live Matthew's life for him. That life didn't even work for Matthew, so what makes you think you could make it work for you?"

Eddie frowned, thinking that through. "I wasn't trying to live his life, just be there for his son."

"You have to do that in your own way, though. Jonathon has a great mother, and the extended family is here for her. You have to make your own decision about what's best for you. I have no shadow of a doubt that you will fulfill the promise you made your brother, but it can't define your entire life. Work out if you want to move to L.A. for your own sake, not for that promise. Otherwise, you'll come to resent that little boy, and that's not fair on him."

"But he didn't ask for any of this, Gran. He needs me."

"Just think on it." She rose from the chair, hugged him and kissed the top of his head.

“I know you’ll make the right decision. You always do.”

She let herself out of the cabin, leaving him feeling less certain about the world and himself. He reached for the whiskey and poured himself another shot.

*

Diane had been gone about half an hour when Layla knocked on his door. His heart ached at the sight of her—her features as familiar as if he’d known her his entire life, and her big, beautiful heart in her eyes. He desperately wanted to haul her into his arms but wasn’t sure what the rules were now. Before, they’d had an understanding, both knowing where the boundaries of their fake relationship were, and then they’d started stretching the edges, but still knew where those boundaries were supposed to be. Now, there was nothing. No fake plans to keep them together, and nothing left of what they’d built between them either.

“Hey,” he said, unsure of what else he could say.

“Hey,” she said softly back.

He stood back to let her in, and she brushed past, stopping in front of the suitcases.

“So soon?” she said, her face pale.

It had to be soon. If he didn’t leave quickly, he might not be able to leave her at all. “It’s like a band-aids—best to rip it off quickly.”

Her attention didn’t waver from the suitcases as she blinked rapidly. “I guess there’s no point delaying it since we’ll all be leaving soon anyway.”

“Did Gran give you the final decision?” He thought back over everything his grandmother had said, but couldn’t remember her saying she’d decided.

“No, she was exceedingly polite all afternoon and gave no indication. I’m pretty certain she’s already decided and is just going through the motions.”

He took the whiskey glasses through to the kitchen sink, then turned and rested a hip against the counter. “I don’t want to be pessimistic, but she dropped by earlier to talk about

some family things, and even though we didn't talk about the sanctuary, she didn't seem very positive."

"It's okay." She pulled herself up on the counter across from him. "It's better I'm not blindsided."

"Layla, I'm sorry."

"You didn't cause this. I did."

"Not for that. For… us. For leaving when you asked me to stay."

She slid down off the counter as if needing something to do with the same restless energy that was filling his system, and stayed where she was—not coming closer, or moving farther away. Just stuck in their awkward limbo.

"I understand, Eddie. I really do. As someone who grew up with parents who weren't committed to my welfare, I really admire that you're willing to do this for Jonathon. And that Caroline asked you to do it."

"It's just…" He speared his fingers through his hair. "I've never wanted to stay somewhere more. I told you once that I've been searching for a place to belong for most of my life, and… I need you to know that if I could..." He didn't even know how to finish that sentence.

"I know," she rasped. "Me too."

God, the pain in her eyes just about did him in. How could he stand it? He held out a hand and she flew to him, and he wrapped his arms around her tight, his body fighting the thought of having to let her go as much as his heart.

Her arms wrapped around his waist, her cheek pressed against his throbbing heart, and she felt so damn perfect there. He pressed his cheek to the top of her head, inhaling the floral scent of her shampoo, bracing himself for the moment he'd have to release her, and she looked at him with eyes that were welling with tears and whispered his name and he was

gone. He leaned down and brushed a kiss over her lips, just a goodbye kiss, but she lifted up on her tiptoes and slid a hand around the back of his neck, holding his head in place, and he gave in and kissed her with all the desperation he felt, showing her how much she meant, hands cupping her face, stroking down her back, until he pulled away, needing to get air into his screaming lungs, and they stood trembling, his forehead pressed to hers, both of them panting.

"Stay tonight," he whispered. "Please, just stay tonight."

"Yes," she said.

He took her hand and led her to the bedroom, with no idea if this was going to make it easier or harder to leave tomorrow. The only thing he was sure about was that if it meant having Layla in his bed one last time, he didn't care.

*

Layla arrived back at her own cabin a little after dawn, before anyone else was up. Eddie had still been sleeping, and she'd given herself a few long moments to watch him, to memorize the curve of his jaw, the shape of his nose, the fan of dark lashes against his cheek. It had been a wrench to leave his bed, knowing it was probably the last time, but Diane was an early riser and Layla needed to make the most of the few hours left to convince her to keep the sanctuary.

Zeb had stayed with Willow, and since Doris and Rafaela were both asleep, she let them be. Autumn would take them out once she woke up, and Bud would arrive soon to take them for a morning walk. She had a quick shower and an even quicker coffee, then headed for Diane's cabin.

"Layla," Diane said as she opened the door with a folded pair of reading glasses in her hand. "This is early. Is everything okay?"

Layla did her best to exude enthusiasm and competence. "I thought you might like a

morning walk."

"You showed me the changes to Applestead yesterday." She tilted her head down, as if looking at her over glasses she wasn't even wearing.

"That's true," she said brightly. "But I showed you what we'd already achieved. Now I'd like to show you the Applestead of the future. As we walk, I'll tell you about the things we have planned for the town."

Diane opened her mouth and Layla was sure she was about to say no, but then she sighed. "I'll get my coat."

They spent two hours traipsing around the small town, Layla pointing out locations that held possibilities, calling on every idea she'd ever had about the sanctuary. She also outlined suggestions Autumn had made to get them on a more stable financial footing, even though that wasn't really Layla's area. If Diane agreed to let them stay open, Autumn's expertise would be critical. But in the meantime, she had to let Diane see all the potential she'd be throwing away. Diane was attentive but non-committal.

By the time they made it back to the cabins, the rest of the residents were out and about, walking dogs, going about their day, starting on chores—all on their best behavior as if they were on a movie set rather than their own lives—and with extra-wide smiles for Diane.

"Thank you for the tour," Diane said at her gate. "It was informative."

The nerves in her belly exploded. She couldn't let Diane go yet—not until she knew for sure that she'd convinced her. "We're just getting started! How about we check in on the dogs? I know J.R. and Goliath would love to see you."

"As appealing as that sounds, I'll need to return to Boston this morning," Diane said. "Would you be a dear and gather everyone together? Maybe over in the park."

A cloud of fog descended, filling her brain, making thought or movement difficult, and spread through her body, slowing her blood, chilling her skin. "Sure. Give me twenty

minutes."

They were all in the park in under fifteen. Alberto drove Rhonda the short distance in a golf cart, and everyone had brought their dogs—Goliath and the small, white fluffies being held in arms to stop them attacking the others. Eddie was in the thick of it, helping settle J.R. and divert Billy Bob's attention from the squirrel in the tree. The air around them was heavy as the group readied themselves to face the verdict.

Layla moved from person to person, dog to dog, checking the people were okay, offering smiles and attempting to diffuse the tension, and that the dogs weren't too affected by the anxiety surrounding them, giving them each extra attention. Her little group were also tending to each other, and her chest just about burst with pride. If she'd achieved nothing else, for this one dazzling moment in time, she'd built something real. Something that made a difference.

As Diane strode towards them, Eddie dropped an arm across Layla's shoulders, and Valentina linked elbows with her. The instinct to hold her breath in anticipation was powerful enough that Layla had to focus on drawing air into her lungs. Passing out wouldn't help anyone.

Diane's face was grim. "Is this everyone?" she asked as she stopped in front of the small crowd. "I don't want to have to announce this twice. And it's only fair that you all hear it from me."

"It's everyone," Layla said, her voice croaky, and Eddie squeezed her shoulder.

"Before you announce anything," Hank said, drawing himself to his full height, "I have something to say."

"Look," Diane began with a sympathetic smile. "I don't want to give anyone a false sense of optimism by letting you all talk, or to drag this out. I'm sorry, but I'm revoking the agreement and taking Applestead back."

Valentina gasped. “What about the dogs?”

“I’m not completely heartless.” Diane shot her a reproving look. “I’ll give a sizable donation to Layla’s rescue group, which will allow her to continue the work she was doing with the foster network before this all started. And a relocation fund for each of you if you want it, as a thank you for being part of the experiment. But you must understand that Applestead is a substantial asset, and of personal significance to me and my family. I can’t, in good conscience, just sign it away unless I’m one hundred percent confident in that decision, and I’m just not.”

Layla had been expecting the decision, but it was still a sucker punch, and she leaned heavily on Eddie and Valentina’s support on either side. She’d done her best—bought the time yesterday and tried to convince Diane, but it was over.

She squeezed her eyes shut for a long moment and told herself to get it together. The sanctuary might be dead, but she was still the leader, and she had to step up and lead. She needed to place dogs back with foster carers, help the residents with their moves home, and then after everything was in order, she had to head back to Boston herself and look for a job. The only ray of light in this whole debacle was Diane offering a relocation fund. Layla vowed to work hard to ensure that Valentina, Nell, and Bud, especially, who’d each had very little a few months ago, would be okay when they left Applestead. At least she’d be able to give them that.

For now, there was a job to do, and she was going to step up and do it.

She squared her shoulders. “How long can we have?”

“Take as long as you need.” Diane looked at her kindly. “I know this won’t be easy. I’m truly sorry for that, Layla.”

She could hardly blame her. In Diane’s shoes she might have made the same call. And she had to remember that Diane was still going to help reestablish the rescue group with its

foster network, so she summoned a polite smile. “You have to do what you have to do. Thank you for the opportunity.” She turned to the residents. “I just want to thank everyone for coming on this—”

“Just wait one doggone moment,” Rhonda said harshly. Everyone froze, watching Rhonda struggle to her feet, and stand, resting on her crutches.

“Rhonda?” Diane said. “Are you alright?”

“As a matter of fact, I’m not. You’re taking my home away.”

“Darling, you still have your rooms with me,” Diane said soothingly. “You can bring your hound too.”

Rhonda narrowed her eyes. “I want this home.”

“I’m sorry, but you of all people should see—”

“I’ll tell you what I see.” She swayed a little on the crutches, and Alberto quickly steadied her with an arm around her waist. “Thank you,” she said to him. “Where was I? Right. I’ll tell you what I see. A woman who has run herself ragged for weeks on end, working into the night, creating a place for all of these dogs and the future dogs. And for all these people too. People who didn’t have a home. Valentina had just a bedroom in a house where she was unhappy. Hank and Alberto had a house of their own, but it was an empty nest, and Applestead has given them a reason to get up in the mornings again.”

“That’s true,” Alberto said. “We’re needed again.”

“And Eddie. I’ve been watching that boy since he was a baby, and I’ve never seen him as happy and settled as he has been here. And Nell—she literally had nowhere else to go. You should see the hours she’s been putting into the vegetable patch, growing food for all of us, and the way she cares for those horrid little fluffy dogs.” She glanced around. “Autumn, who has just dedicated herself to getting the sanctuary on sound financial footing—she needs this place as much as it needs her. And even Bud, the man that you’re upset about. He spends

his days making the lives of everyone else better. He's a ray of goddamn sunshine, and Mr. Darcy loves him, which is saying something. Letting him stay was a sound decision by Layla."

Diane looked like she'd been slapped. "Well, I must say that this surprises me."

"I'm not done," Rhonda said. "You know what this place is? A home. For the dogs and for the people. And you know what a home is? It's a place to belong, with love and acceptance and family and people who are committed to you." She paused and glanced at Layla, her face softening. "Layla taught me that. And Valentina. And all of this rag tag bunch."

Hank started clapping and was soon joined by the entire group. Tinkerbell stood, wagging, like the applause was for her. Goliath growled.

Eddie placed a kiss on her cheek, and she simply gaped at him, not bothering—or able—to hide her shock. He leaned down to her ear and whispered, "It's all true. You've done a great job."

"She's right," Alberto said, his voice deep and sure. "Layla has built all of this in the short time we've been here. Imagine what she could build if she was given the opportunity?"

Layla blinked back tears as she looked around the group of people who were charging in like the cavalry.

"I, um…" Diane appeared uncharacteristically lost for words.

Valentina pulled herself to her full height. "I have lived in many places in my life. With family, renting my own place, and with roommates. And I have never belonged in those places as much as I belong here, with these people and dogs, creating something truly special together." Then she crossed the distance to Diane and plonked Goliath in her arms. The scraggly Chihuahua bared his teeth at Diane.

Hank stepped closer to Valentina, creating a tight group around Layla, but kept eye

contact with Diane. “You say that you’re not one-hundred-percent sure. Well, I am. I haven’t run a business the size of yours, but I ran a diner for over thirty years, while we were raising three kids. The thing about a diner is you meet a lot of people every day, and you become pretty attuned to people’s intentions and what’s in their heart. And I support Layla’s leadership.”

Diane stroked the top of Goliath’s head. He snapped at her fingers.

“Before I joined Hank in the diner,” Alberto said, “I was a New York cop so I’m pretty good at judging people too. And I’m honored to follow Layla.”

Nell and Autumn moved closer as Layla turned her back on Diane to hiss to the group, “Think this through. She’s offering you money.”

Nell chuckled. “Layla, we’d rather be here with you. Helping these dogs, and being together.”

Autumn ignored her and faced Diane. “I’ve known Layla for three years, as a colleague and a friend. I trust her with my life.”

Bud cleared his throat and opened his mouth, but Rhonda held up a finger. He closed his mouth contritely, nodded, and stepped back.

“You know something, Gran,” Eddie said, pulling Layla closer into his side, “there’s something else you’re overlooking here. I wouldn’t say you’re beyond reproach in this mess yourself.”

Diane turned to him, her expression much less certain now. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You also tried to manipulate Layla. You asked her to spy on me, much like you asked a bunch of others to lie for you while they were checking up on me, like Alex Sabbatini. Interesting thing is, Layla didn’t do it. Which shows us two things—first, she’s not as easily swayed as you’re making out. She used her judgement to decide that she’d agree to

help her father and me because she believed it was the right thing to do, but she didn't join your plan even though you held Applestead over her. If anything, I'd say that shows she has a strong moral compass, with nerves of steel to match."

Layla tried to swallow past the lump in her throat. A strong moral compass and nerves of steel was a pretty good description of Eddie himself, and yet he was describing her that way. She squeezed the arm that was wrapped around his waist and he smiled down at her, his dark blue eyes brimming with emotion.

"Hang on," Valentina said. "She also told her mother to leave yesterday. She was firm with her—you saw that with your very own eyes, Diane. Which means she made boundaries with you and her mother. She helped two people and she said no to two people. There is no pattern of people manipulating her, just decisions she made."

Diane frowned, shifted her weight, and looked back at Eddie. "You said there were two things?"

He met his grandmother's gaze, unflinching. "The second thing this shows is that you're standing in a glass house while you're throwing those stones."

"I take your point," Diane said and then sighed. "But, look, that still leaves the issue of whether the sanctuary can stand on its own two feet. So far, Layla's management has been leaking money."

Layla's stomach bunched tight. It was true, and it was her biggest fear—getting Applestead financially independent.

"How many assistants do you have just in that room outside your office?" Eddie asked. "Three? Four?"

"Four," Diane said.

"Sure, it's a big company, but you have so much support. Layla's been doing this project on her own, juggling dog behavior and finances and running a town and doing people

management. That's a lot of expertise to expect from any one person. So maybe it has been shaky in one area, but now she has Autumn, who's a whiz with numbers and bursting with ideas about getting the place humming."

Autumn bounced on the balls of her feet. "That's true. I have heaps of ideas, and I'm absolutely committed to helping Layla make this sanctuary work."

Layla reached out and gripped Autumn's hand. "Thank you." No matter what decision Diane made today, Layla would never forget this support from her friends.

"Well, Diane," Rhonda said. "What will it be? You believed in this project and in Layla enough to start with. You have a very good nose for business, but I also know you like to take advice from consultants and experts. In this case, we're the ones on the ground. This group is your experts. And they're all telling you the same thing. Alberto said it best." She smiled up at him as she leaned on him. "Layla built all of this in a pretty short timeframe. Imagine what she could build if she was given a real chance?"

Diane adjusted Goliath in her arms and looked from person to person, a deep line across her forehead as she considered. "I have to admit, this is all very convincing. Though… are you all getting carried away in the moment?"

Valentina looked around, making eye contact with each person before saying, "We're sure."

Diane looked down at Goliath for a beat then said, "Okay, I revoke my earlier decision—the agreement, as it was, stands. As you were."

Everyone clapped and cheered, and J.R. danced in circles, barking at the sky. Layla was pulled from Eddie's grasp by Valentina who hugged her, then Autumn.

Layla stepped forward. "Thank you. I can't tell you how grateful I am that you're giving us a second chance. But," she lifted her chin, "if we're making changes, I have a request."

"Go on then," Diane said, looking resigned.

"The six-month deadline. It's a huge project, and that's not very long. I'm worried that after what was, in effect, a progress report here today, we're still being set up to fail. This is a complex project and it will take a while to hit its stride. I need you to extend the trial period to give us our best shot."

Diane nodded, but before she could speak, Rhonda cut in. "What's the point of the trial period anyway? Haven't we done the trial already? For goodness' sake, Diane, just sign the damned town over already."

Diane blinked at Rhonda. "What drugs, exactly, are you on?"

"Not nearly enough. This knee is throbbing, so let's get this done so I can get it back inside and elevated."

Diane began to laugh. "You know, Layla, dear, I'm not sure I've ever met someone besides me who could inspire that level of loyalty in Rhonda." She shrugged. "Okay, I'll change the clause about financial support to give you the budget for twelve months in total to get you on your feet. But in return, I want to see a solid financial plan. Bring Autumn along when we sit down and work out the new agreement terms—she seems to be the financial brains of the place. And I'll throw in some business mentoring, because as Eddie pointed out, you're doing a wide range of things, and you deserve some more support. And if you make a success of it by the end of the twelve months, I'll sign the town over."

Bud let out a whoop and the rest of the group clapped and hugged. Billy Bob joined in with a deep bark, soon joined by J.R. who was leaping as he barked, enjoying all the enthusiasm around him immensely. Layla stood in the middle of it all, shocked. Half an hour ago she thought she was losing the town, and now, not only was she not losing it, but she was getting much better terms. Hank pulled her into a hug, and Alberto was helping Rhonda back into the golf cart.

She looked around for Eddie but couldn't see him. "Where's Eddie?" she said to Hank.

"As soon as Diane said we could keep going, he asked if he could borrow Tink and left."

She didn't get to think that through, as Diane was trying to pull her aside to talk about lawyers and contracts, Zeb was nudging her hand, and Bud was pulling at her arm and congratulating her, telling her he'd always believed in her. Dazed, Layla looked around the residents—the rag tag group, Rhonda had called them. They'd saved the sanctuary. With the extension to twelve months, and the extra support, they were going to make it a success. She could stay in Applestead with these people and rescue more dogs. It was all her dreams come true, except one…

She wouldn't have Eddie.

*

It was over an hour before Layla had a moment to sneak away. The residents had wanted to celebrate at the hotel, and she'd wanted to celebrate with them, but part of her attention had been consumed by wondering where Eddie had gone. He'd talked the night before about leaving quickly, like ripping off a band-aid. Once he'd known that the town was safe, had he thrown his suitcases in his jeep and left? But he'd borrowed Tink, and left Zeb with her, which made no sense.

She told Autumn she was going back to the cabin with Zeb and Rafaela, and her friend said they may as well walk back together. Layla nodded, despite wishing she had a moment to herself, and pushed open the big, glass door at the front of the building. As the door opened, she caught sight of Eddie walking towards her, hands dug deep into his pockets, Willow and Tink in step at his side. Her heart stuttered painfully and she lifted a hand to her chest as if that could ease it.

"Layla," he said, his voice awkward, then nodded at Autumn coming out the door behind her. "Autumn."

Zeb rushed to Willow, and they both wagged and sniffed each other over, looking for what they'd missed in each other's lives. Tink wagged as she watched the other two, simply finding joy in life. Rafaela laid down and plonked her head on her paws.

"Hey, Eddie," Autumn said, looking from one to the other. "Ah, you know what? I forgot to say something to Nell. I'll catch you later." She practically ran back into the hotel and shut the door firmly behind her. Layla watched her go, half wishing she could follow in case this was goodbye and she could delay the goodbye a little longer.

"We missed you at the celebration," she said, not quite ready to ask if his jeep was already packed.

"Yeah," he said, his voice as rough as gravel, "sorry I missed it. I needed to call Caroline."

A knife slid straight between her ribs and it took everything inside her to give him a supportive smile. "To tell her when to expect you?"

"To tell her not to expect me." His gaze was steady, as if waiting, but he wasn't making sense.

"Where will you go?" He'd once told her that parks needed rangers and lighthouses needed keepers, which meant the options were relatively unlimited, but she knew he'd probably keep to the west coast, close to Jonathon, and she couldn't begrudge him that.

"I was thinking about staying right here. Well, not in the hotel, I was thinking in that cabin." He waved an arm down the street in the direction of his place, but kept his gaze on her. "Or, if I'm honest, wherever it suits you. If the offer is still open and you'll still have me."

She blinked. "Did I miss something?"

"I listened to Rhonda and the others talking and telling Diane what was great about Applestead and your vision for it, and I realized that was what I wanted for Jonathon. I made a commitment, but there are several ways I can be around for him. Gran told me last night that I had to be careful not to try and live Matt's life. I still have to live my own life and do what makes me happy. Well, you make me happy, Layla."

"Me?" she repeated faintly, still not sure if she could trust where this was going.

"You," he said certain. "I love you, Layla. I wasn't ready to admit it before because I didn't think I could stay and admitting it would make leaving harder. I thought if I didn't say the words, I could drive on out of here relatively unscathed. But I was fooling myself, because I love you so much that I think I might shatter if I have to contain the feeling any longer. I need to give this love to you, where it belongs."

The world started a slow spin around her. She felt Zeb at her side, and she rested a hand on his head, her anchor, and he pressed against her leg. "You…" She swallowed to get her voice to work. "You really want to stay?"

"Everyone was talking about the community that you've built here, and I want Jonathon to be able to visit that. Not just have me in his life, but you and Tink and Willow and Rhonda and all these other dogs and people you've assembled so far."

She glanced over at the Labrador, sniffing in the bushes, probably hoping for dropped food. "That's why you took Tinkerbell with you for the call."

"She was the ace up my sleeve." He grinned. "I explained that Applestead was important to Jonathon, not just me. Matt didn't get enough time out here when we were kids, and I want better for Jonathon. Then the kid crashed the call and saw Tink and squealed and babbled about how much he loved her, and Caroline didn't have much choice. She's going to let me have him on some of the school holidays, and she'll visit with him sometimes too." Tinkerbell waddled back over when she heard her name, her tail high, ready for wagging,

happy with the world.

"Good job, Tinkerbell," Layla said, stroking the Labrador's soft, black ears.

"I told Gran about Matt's call last night, too, and I'll tell Caroline when I see her in person." He stretched his shoulders, the only sign of how much that conversation must have cost him. "That's thanks to you. You were the one who insisted I shouldn't carry it alone."

"That will be a difficult conversation, but I'm glad. In Caroline's shoes, I'd want to know." Willow nudged Zeb with her snout and he looked up at Layla, and then, seemingly satisfied, trotted after Willow along the verge, sniffing and peeing as they went. Layla watched them as they worked together, finding the best smells, never questioning their mutual devotion. Then she brought her gaze back to Eddie. "If you stayed here, would you take the police job?"

"Maybe. I have a few ideas about work in Larch Valley. I'd take my time and look around." He lifted his hands, but then dropped them again. "So, what do you say? Is the offer to stay still open?"

She took one step toward him, suddenly awkward. "Eddie, I love you. You know that. I just need to know if you can be happy here. Put down roots. Because I'm committed here now, the dogs and the people need me, and—"

He closed the distance and put a finger lightly on her lips. "Well, let me tell you about this little fantasy that keeps playing in my head. It's you and me and we're in the old farmhouse with the orchard."

"The one where you first kissed me?" she said against his fingertip. He moved his hand around to cup the side of her face and she leaned into his palm.

"That's the one." He was close enough now that his warm breath brushed across her skin. "Only, in the fantasy, I've been working hard on weekends, and now it's renovated and we're living there with Willow and Zeb and all the new dogs that you can manage to fit

inside. Kids if you want them. More dogs if you don't."

"That sounds pretty good," Layla said, threading her arms around his waist and holding on tight, and he brought his arms around her shoulders. "That farmhouse could be home to you?"

"It's the perfect home." His gaze was raw, vulnerable. "But to be honest, home will always be wherever you are. I love you, Layla."

"Then stay," she said, her throat so tight she could barely form the words. "Please stay with me here."

His head dipped and his lips skimmed lightly over hers before pressing more firmly and she sighed and stood up on tiptoes so she could kiss him back with all the emotion that was overflowing from her heart.

Behind them, she dimly heard a gasp, then running footsteps and the door swung open. Then Valentina's voice calling out, "Eddie is staying! He and Layla are together for real!"

A cheer sounded from inside the room, followed by assorted barking and yapping, and she felt Eddie smile against her mouth.

She groaned. "How fast can you get that house with the little orchard fixed up?"

He chuckled, then kissed her again, and she stopped paying attention to anything besides the man with his arms around her.

End

CONCLUSION

This thesis—the first comprehensive analysis of the construction of dog characters in popular romance novels—reveals that not all dog characters are created equal. The popular romance genre is an ideal location to examine dog characters as it is fundamentally concerned with exploring relationships, including those between human and non-human animals, especially dogs. Using practice-led research, analysis of a corpus of one hundred popular romance fiction works, and mobilising scholarship across the fields of narratology, animal studies, and popular romance studies, this thesis has built a model of dog character construction. The model reveals that choices a writer makes when constructing a dog character, either consciously or unconsciously, embed the potential for how developed or undeveloped the fictional dog will be. Writers' decisions about dog characters fall across six dimensions: names, appearance, breed, backstory, gender, and age. Each dimension may be either present or absent in the text and, if present, contains coded information or other associated cues that create the possibility of complexity. The sum of the authorial decisions across the six dimensions can be mapped to analyse the dog character's inbuilt potential for complexity.

A dog character's name encodes several layers of meaning, from the existence of the name itself, through to the name's location within the naming system, the choice of a specific name, and whether there is variety of form through nicknames. If another character performs a naming or renaming act in the text, the dog character is granted additional potential. The description of a dog character's appearance enacts a coded language of meaning for the interpretation of personality traits, particularly the features humans find appealing, such as eyes, ears, and coat colour. Further, the attractiveness of the dog character increases the possibility of reader attachment, and unattractiveness frees the dog from expectations to perform "dog" in appealing or expected ways, and therefore activates possibilities of

character complexity. Of the six dimensions, the dog's breed does most work in establishing character through both the purebred/mutt dichotomy and the choice of specific breed. Authorial decisions about breed delimit opportunities for the dog character. The inclusion of, or speculation about, a dog character's backstory, especially one with complexity and distinctiveness, increases the dog's capacity to be a developed character. If the backstory also seeds internal conflict, it plants an imperative for character growth. The dog character's gender does the least work in establishing the character, and, when viewed within the broader context of gender representation in fiction, reveals biases towards male dogs in several areas, including the number of female to male dogs, the number of female dogs in single-dog stories, and the intersection of femaleness and ugliness. The dog character's phase of life, from puppy to adult and senior, is a significant determinant of their capacity for richness of character, and carries potential across a range of areas, from their appeal to humans to the roundness of their personality, from their capacity to take on formal and informal roles to the space available in their past for backstory. Across these six dimensions, authors are faced with an infinitude of choices, which they make either consciously or unconsciously.

To tie together the threads of my creative and exegetical work for this thesis, I have mapped the sum of those authorial decisions for a selection of dog characters, giving a visual representation of each dog's potential to become a developed character. These maps are customized radar graphs, with each of five axes representing one dimension of my model. For this analysis, I have not included the dimension of gender, as the biases inherent in depictions of male and female animals primarily reflect patriarchy's influence in how society views animals, both human and non-human, which overrides opportunities for character individuality in the gender dimension. I used the remaining five dimensions of the model outlined in this exegesis to read the dog characters. For each of the primary dimensions, I read for signs that the dog character has the potential to be more or less developed, using the

elements outlined in that section. For example, when examining backstory, I searched for mention in the text of the dog character's backstory or speculation if it was unknowable, and if either of those things were present I allocated one point. If the backstory was distinctive or complex, I allocated a second point, and if the backstory created an internal conflict for the dog, I allocated a third point. A maximum of three points was obtainable for any one dimension (see table 1). Once those figures are plotted onto a radar graph, the cumulative effect of the authorial decisions is made visible. The coloured/solid area in the graphs shows the amount of inbuilt potential for the dog to become a developed character. Note that not all potential is realised, so some dog characters have potential yet remain an undeveloped character. However, developed dog characters, that is, those with character complexity, the capacity to surprise, and involvement in their story's plot, are more likely to have been granted potential through authorial choices made across the model's dimensions, and those without inbuilt potential are unlikely to become a developed character.

Table 1
Dimensions of the dog character construction model and point allocations for mapping.

Dimension	***1 point each (to a maximum of 3 points) for:***
Name	Named Human name Nickname (used more than once) Naming act Renaming act
Appearance	Any description of appearance Detailed description of appearance Unattractive appearance Conflicting perceptions of attractiveness from various characters
Breed	Specific breed or breed mix identified / speculated on Is a crossbreed Undesirable breed in mix (such as pit bull)
Backstory	Present/wondered about/implied Distinctive or complex Creates internal conflict for dog
Age	Puppy (1 point) Adult (3 points) Senior (2.5 points)

The process of reading a dog character, allocating points, and mapping potential can be shown through a worked example. The following example draws together the details across the model's dimensions for one dog: Katie, from Crusie's *Crazy for You*, a stray whose adoption by protagonist Quinn is the inciting incident for the text's plot.

Names: As noted in the Names section, Katie is named (1 point) with a human name (1 point), that she is granted in a naming act early in the book (1 point), giving her a total of three points.

Appearance: Katie is described as having a "wiry back body, skinny white legs, narrow black head" (1) with a "bony little butt" (7). Katie also has "one white eyebrow … and four white socks, and the tip of [her] tail [is] white, too, as if [she] had been dipped in paint" (5). In Quinn's best friend Darla's point of view, Katie is explicitly labelled as "ugly" (15) and in Bill the antagonist's point of view is described as a "little rat" (53). Yet in Quinn's own point of view, positive descriptors are used, such as Katie's "hypnotic dark eyes" (20) and her "shiny smooth coat" (7). Katie is described (1 point) in detail (1 point), is labelled unattractive (1 point), and has conflicting descriptions by various characters (1 point) taking her to, and exceeding, the maximum of 3 points.

Breed: Katie is identified as a "mixed breed" (3) with no mention of a popular or exotic breed in the mix to soften the image (unlike Fred the basset x beagle in Crusie's *Anyone but You*). Although she doesn't have an especially unpopular breed, such as pit bull, in her ancestry, her description and the frequent references to her resemblance to a rat imply her genealogy owes much to the less popular small terrier breeds. Katie is thus identified as a mixed breed (1 point for her breed being noted in the text and 1 point for that breed being a cross) and has unpopular breed/s in the mix (1 point), giving her a total of 3 points.

Backstory: Katie is a stray, leaving her backstory as unknowable, though Quinn speculates that Katie's homelessness was intentional: "Somebody had thrown this darling

little dog away. It wasn't going to happen again. *I will not betray you*" (8). Katie displays signs of anxiety, especially in the opening scenes where Katie "shudder[s]" and "tremble[s]" (2) and "cower[s] back" (5), implying her history has included scary situations. By the end of the book, Katie is in the car at the drive-in with Quinn and the hero Nick, where she "peer[s] out the open passenger window, looking for approaching trouble but fairly calm about it, as if she knew Bill was locked up for at least her life span" (338), showing that she has overcome the internal conflict caused by her backstory. The anxiety arising from her (unknown) backstory impels the character growth that is completed in the final scene. In summary, Quinn speculates about Katie's backstory of being thrown away (1 point), the backstory is implied to be complex, with Katie's various manifestations of anxiety (1 point), and it creates internal conflict (1 point), again giving Katie the maximum of three points.

Age: Katie's age is not defined in the book, which, as noted in the Age section, is common for adult dog characters. Additionally, she shows no markers for being either a puppy or a senior, so I have coded her as an adult dog, giving her three points for age.

Gender: Although this dimension is not included in this mapping exercise, it is worth noting that Katie is female, placing her in the minority of dog characters in the corpus (29%), and is also a female dog in a single-dog story, a group that forms just 24% of the corpus dogs. She exhibits stereotypically feminine traits such as passivity: for example, she's a "submission pee-er" (31) and when she does accidentally urinate on the kitchen floor, she "look[s] apologetic and distraught" (31). Yet she also exhibits stereotypical male behaviour, such as aggression: "The dog curled a lip and growled low in its throat, viciously staking its claim to Quinn, and Bill pulled his hand back" (40). Even within this unmapped dimension, Katie displays complexity.

Overall: Katie scores the maximum of 3 points on each dimension of the model, revealing that she contains high potential to become a developed character (see fig. 15). For

Katie, the potential produced across the dimensions is realized: she behaves in unexpected ways and has agency in her scenes. Her arrival in Quinn's classroom is the inciting incident that sets the plot in motion, and she remains an active participant in the plot events, including attacking Bill the antagonist in the book's climax. Katie is a well-developed character.

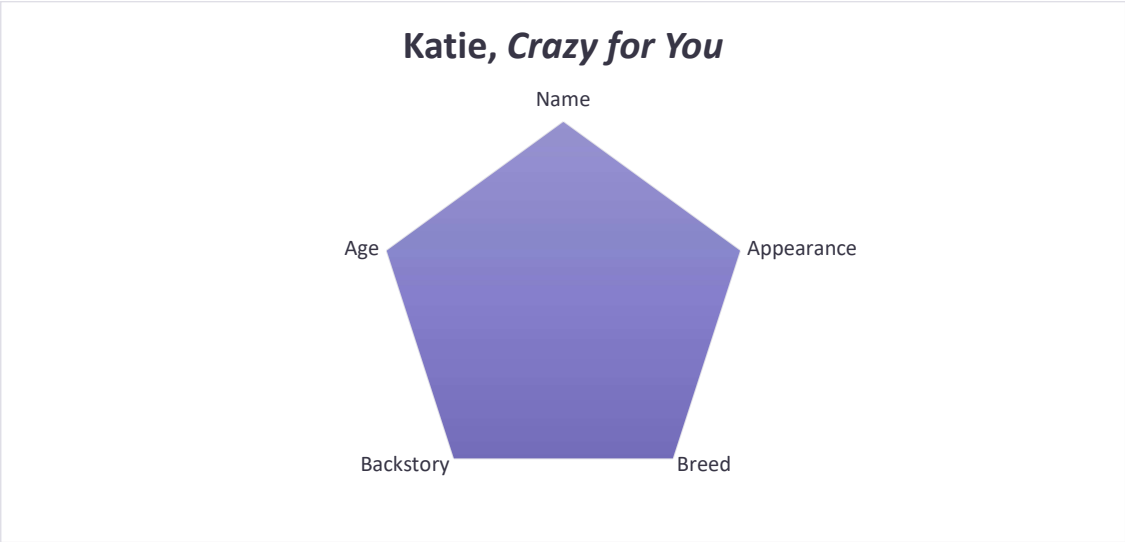

Fig. 15. Map of embedded potential in the construction of Katie's character (from *Crazy for You* by Jennifer Cruise).

When applied to a selection of other dog characters in the corpus, the model reveals the scope of possible iterations of fictional dogs (fig. 16). It should be noted that the allocation of points is not an exact science, but an exercise to show the utility of this research for understanding how we make dogs in theory and practice. Consequently, in several instances, I had to make a judgement call (for example, the line between 'any description of appearance' and 'detailed description of appearance' was sometimes unclear), but the maps present a general picture of the potential for a developed versus an undeveloped dog

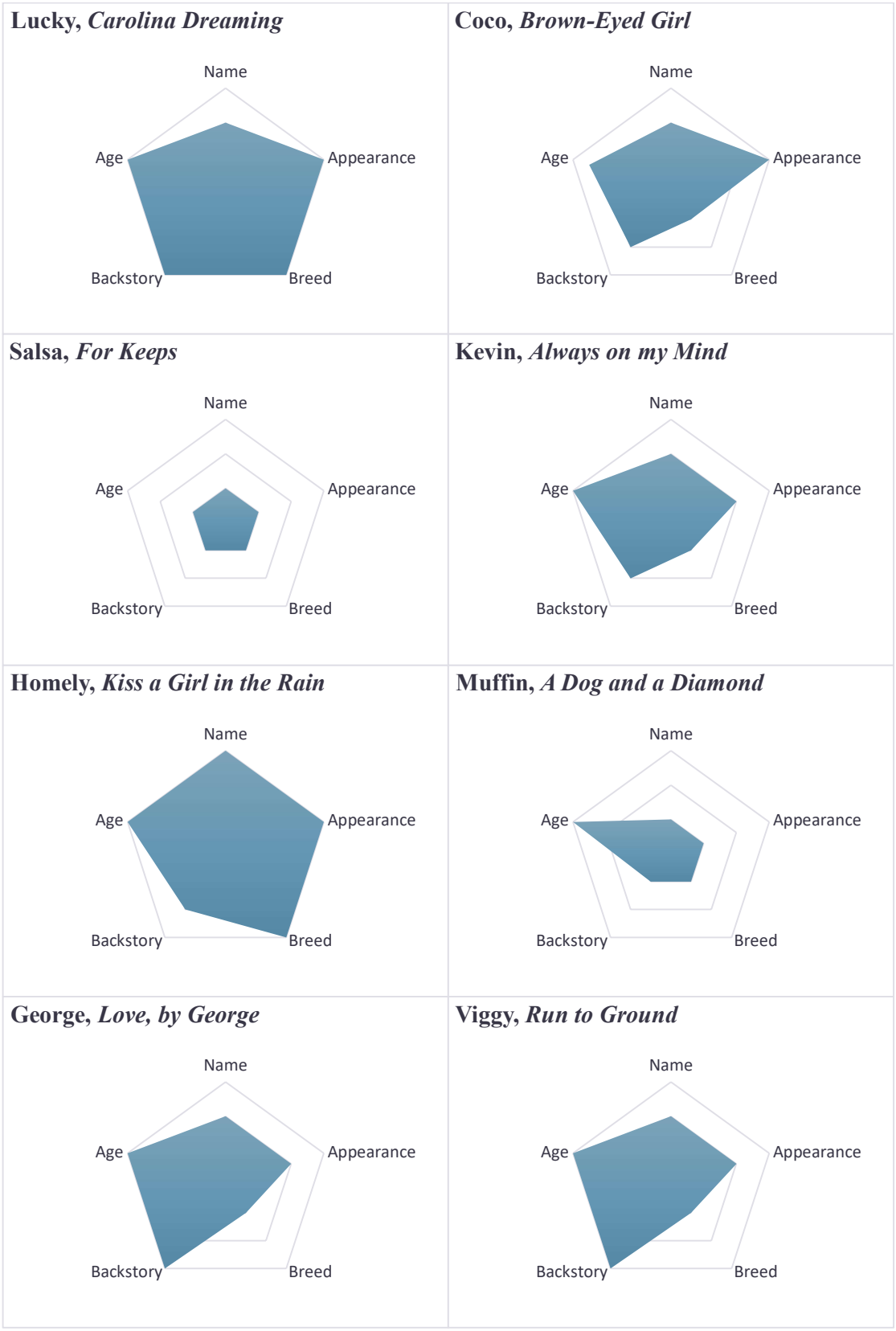

Fig. 16. Character maps of dogs in corpus, labelled by dog character name and text title.

character. In fact, for Viggy, Beau, Coco, Homely/Harry, Muffin, Kevin, Lucky, and George, their level of development, that is, character complexity, the capacity to surprise, and involvement in their story's plot, does roughly correspond to the amount of surface area in their character map.

Figure 17 maps eight of the thirteen dog characters from the creative artefact, taking the work of the thesis full circle: the practice-led research was instrumental in reaching my findings, and these maps use the model developed to read the artefact's dog characters. This set of maps also demonstrates that a writer's goal may not always be to create a dog who has significant potential. A character such as Burrito allows for narrative efficiency—through my conscious choices, he is generally identified in the text as part of a group of three dogs, has few distinguishing features, and has limited impact on the plot. With a large cast of dogs, characters such as Princess, Crystal and Burrito were essential so as not to overwhelm the reader with details. Tinkerbell has the advantages of being a pure, popular breed, and being attractive (even with a coat in the less-popular black) which allows her to rapidly build appeal to and attachment with other characters and readers and fulfil her role in the plot. In contrast, Rafaela scores a maximum of three points in each dimension besides age, which allows her to both have a character arc, as well as have a strong presence on the page despite being introduced late in the narrative. Mr. Darcy sits somewhere in the middle—he scores lower on breed (1.5 points) and name (2 points) than Rafaela, but the backstory and appearance dimensions are hit hard, giving him internal conflict to overcome in his character arc and a distinctive appearance compared to the other dog characters. It is Mr. Darcy's growth from his internal conflict, and his influence on Rhonda's growth, that snowballs to affect the climax of the narrative. Through Burrito, Tinkerbell, Rafaela, Mr. Darcy, and the nine others, the creative work produces, experiments with, and tests a range of patterns of dog character construction, informing the conclusions of my research.

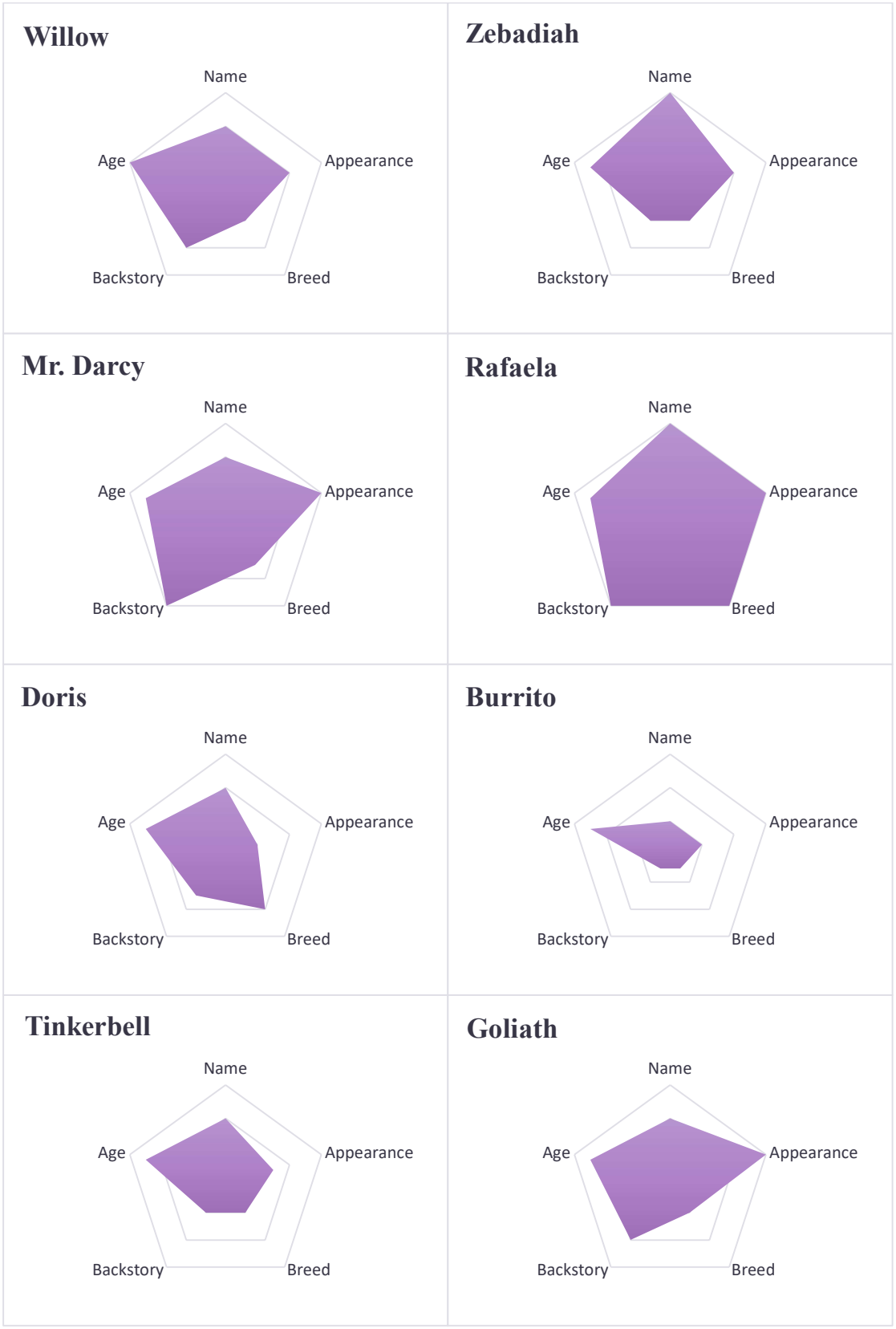

Fig. 17. Character maps of dogs from thesis creative artefact, *Wherever You Are*.

Complex, individualized dog characters in popular romance novels carry benefits beyond good narrative practice—well-written dogs can lead to a better life for real world dogs. As detailed throughout this thesis, bias and stigma against certain types of dogs (such as black dogs, crossbreeds, and seniors) create harm and negative outcomes (such as abandonment and higher euthanasia rates). A strength of the popular romance genre is its capacity to do the work of breaking down bias and stigma—many novels in the genre explicitly do this work through progressive storytelling, for example, around issues such as same-sex romances, positive sexuality, body positivity, neurodiversity, mental health, and disability justice. Accordingly, the romance genre presents an excellent forum for the critique of anthropocentric and biased attitudes toward dogs, and the model developed in this thesis offers a starting point for that work. Challenging writers to construct, and readers to read, a greater range of canine diversity—more single-dog female characters, more dogs with special needs, and more ugly-mutt dog characters—could serve to initiate the interrogation of their own unjust biases, to the real-world benefit of dogs. In this way, popular romance has unexplored animal rights and environmental justice potential, and this angle deserves further exploration.

This thesis offers a deeper understanding of dog character construction in the popular romance genre, with potential transferability to other fiction genres. It provides a theoretical and creative model that demonstrates how a writer's choices across six dimensions embed potential within a fictional dog to become a more-or-less-developed character. It urges writers, within and beyond the genre of focus, to approach dog characters with as much creative care as their stories' human characters. The model also functions as a lens for the close reading of fictional dogs, allowing them to be foregrounded in the scholarship as characters in their own right, beyond metaphors and anthropocentric analyses. This interrogation of canine characters in popular romance fiction and the model of dog character

construction contributes new knowledge to the fields of narratology, non-human animal studies, and popular romance studies. Ultimately, this thesis is a call to write dogs that are as complex and individual as dogs in the real world.

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APPENDIX A

Corpus Works

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APPENDIX B

Corpus Dog Characters

Notes:

1. Each dog character was required to meet the criteria outlined in the Introduction to be included, which means that some corpus works contained more dog characters than have been analysed and included here. For example, the dogs who are residents at the large training facility in Roxanne St. Claire's *Old Dog, New Tricks* are not included, just the two characters who appear in a minimum of three scenes, Rusty and Goldie. Newborn puppies born to a dog character during the story, such as the unnamed litter that Dixie births in *Forever Yours, Sweetheart*, were also not included as they rarely provided data for analysis, or appeared for the minimum of three scenes.

2. The data included in this table covers four of the six dimensions of the dog character construction model. The remaining two dimensions, appearance and backstory, yield more complex data that resists being coded into simple columns, and so has not been included here.

Name	Breed	Gender	Age	No. of Dogs in Story	Novel/Novella Title
Amber	Labrador x	f	adult	4	*For Keeps*
Angie	Irish setter	f	adult	2	*All I Ever Wanted*
Annie	pit bull	f	puppy	3	*Hope Flames*
Ashur	Belgian Malinois	m	adult	5	*Forever Yours, Sweetheart*
Atlas	Great Dane	m	adult	4	*No One Like You*
Atticus	Saint Bernard	m	adult	1	*The Bookworm and the Beast*
Bandit	Labrador x boxer	m	adult	1	*Herons Landing*
Batman	rat terrier	m	adult	1	*Next to You*

Baxter	not identified	m	adult	2	*Dog Park Sweethearts*
Bear	not identified	m	adult	1	*The Returning Hero*
Beau	bearded collie	m	puppy	1	"On the Secretary's Christmas List" in *A Puppy for Christmas*
Beauty	spaniel	f	adult	1	*Somebody to Love*
Bernie	Saint Bernard	m	adult	1	*Wife Wanted*
Bessie	border collie	f	adult	2	*Mardie and the City Surgeon*
Bindi	beagle	f	adult	3	*Montana Secret Santa*
Blue	Australian cattle dog	m	adult	1	*Wish*
Bogart	Labrador	m	adult	4	*The Search*
Boo	Maltese?	m	adult	1	*Sugar's Twice as Sweet*
Boomer	German shepherd	m	adult	3	*Hope Flames*
Bounce	border collie	m	adult	2	*Mardie and the City Surgeon*
Bowie	husky x	m	adult	2	*All I Ever Wanted*
Brutus	German shepherd	m	adult	2	*New York, Actually*
Buffy	golden retriever	m	puppy	2	*Operation: Second Chance*
Buster	Labrador x terrier	m	adult	1	*Somebody's Baby*
Butch	Chihuahua x Jack Russell	m	adult	2	*Bought for the Greek's Revenge*
Butch	Chihuahua	m	adult	2	"Tailspin" in *The Truth About Cats and Dogs*
C.J.	basset hound	f	senior	1	*Dear Cordelia*
Casper	boxer	m	adult	3	*Unleashed*
Caesar	golden retriever	m	senior	1	*The Chocolate Promise*
Cerberus	Jack Russell	m	adult	1	*Holding Out for a Hero*
Chance	Cairn terrier	m	adult	5	*A New Leash on Love*

Chance	golden retriever	m	adult	2	*The Sweetheart Bargain*
Charlie	crossbreed	m	senior	1	*Newlyweds of Convenience*
Chip	boxer	f	puppy	4	*For Keeps*
Chutney	cavoodle	m	adult	3	*Never Say No to a Caffarelli*
Cobie	Labrador x	f	adult	2	*Dog Park Sweethearts*
Coco	Chihuahua	f	senior	1	*Brown-Eyed Girl*
Coco	Labrador	f	puppy	1	*Just Like Heaven*
Colin	dachshund	m	adult	2	*Must Love Wieners*
Cricket	crossbreed	m	adult	1	*The Most Scandalous Ravensdale*
Cutter	German shepherd	m	adult	1	*Operation: Midnight*
Daisy	Labrador	f	adult	5	"Home for Christmas" in *Rescuing Christmas*
Daisy	Labrador	f	adult	3	*Hope Flames*
Darcy	English mastiff	m	adult	4	"Secondhand Sam" in *The Truth About Cats and Dogs*
Delilah	springer spaniel	f	adult	5	"Home for Christmas" in *Rescuing Christmas*
Deputy	Bernese mountain dog	m	adult	1	*Slow Dance with the Sheriff*
Dixie	golden retriever x	f	adult	5	*Forever Yours, Sweetheart*
Doug	pug	m	adult	1	*The Problem with Pugs*
Dudley	basset hound x	m	senior	1	*Dishing up Desire*
Duke	German shepherd	m	adult	1	*Where We Belong*
Einstein	sheepdog	m	adult	4	*Getting Rid of Bradley*
Ewok	shih tzu x cocker spaniel	m	adult	2	"Holiday Haven" in *Rescuing Christmas*
Fabio	poodle x Boston terrier	m	adult	1	*Divorced, Desperate & Delicious*
Fizz	golden retriever	m	puppy	1	"The Soldier, the Puppy and Me" in *A Puppy for Christmas*

Frank	Labrador	m	adult	1	*Tempted by the Wrong Twin*
Franny	crossbreed	f	adult	1	*Just Breathe*
Fred	basset x beagle	m	adult	1	*Anyone but You*
Gem	Labrador	m	adult	4	*One Good Cowboy*
George	Great Dane	m	adult	1	*Love, by George*
Goldie	golden retriever	f	adult	2	*Old Dog, New Tricks*
Gun	Belgian Malinois	m	adult	5	*Forever Yours, Sweetheart*
Hamlet	basset hound	m	adult	2	*Operation: Second Chance*
Harley	Saint Bernard x Bernese mountain dog	m	puppy	1	"A Puppy for Will" in *Rescuing Christmas*
Harriet	Pekingese	f	adult	4	"Secondhand Sam" in *The Truth About Cats and Dogs*
Harry	miniature schnauzer	m	adult	2	*Falling for Jack*
Harry	beagle x	m	adult	1	*The McKettricks of Texas: Garrett*
Harvey	border collie	m	adult	1	*The Finn Factor*
Hector	terrier	m	adult	1	*The Greek's Christmas Bride*
Heisenburg	crossbreed	m	adult	4	*Getting Rid of Bradley*
Hershey	Labrador	m	puppy	5	*A New Leash on Love*
Homely /Harry	crossbreed	m	adult	1	*Kiss a Girl in the Rain*
Horse	wolfhound x	m	adult	1	*Nikki and the Lone Wolf*
Jameson	Labrador	m	puppy	1	*One Day in Apple Grove*
Jaws	Labrador x retriever	m	puppy	4	*The Search*
Jed	dogue de Bordeaux	m	adult	1	*Date with Destiny*
Jelly Bean	Weimaraner	m	adult	1	*Hot under the Collar*
Jess	border collie	f	adult	2	*Falling for Jack*
Justice	bloodhound	m	adult	1	*Tracking Justice*

Katie	crossbreed	f	adult	1	*Crazy for You*
Kevin	Great Dane	m	adult	1	*Always on my Mind*
Lucky	pit bull x shepherd	m	adult	1	*Carolina Dreaming*
Mac	border collie	m	adult	2	*Picture Perfect Wedding*
Maggie-May	Maltese x shih tzu	f	adult	2	*Picture Perfect Wedding*
Mars	Belgian Malinois	m	adult	5	*Forever Yours, Sweetheart*
Maxwell	crossbreed	m	adult	4	*Getting Rid of Bradley*
Milo	Labrador	m	adult	1	*Rescue My Heart*
Miss Molly	golden retriever	f	adult	1	*Taking Home the Tycoon*
Miss Sadie	bichon frise	f	adult	2	*The Sweetheart Bargain*
Mojo	boxer x	m	adult	3	*Unleashed*
Molly	golden retriever	f	adult	1	*Any Day Now*
Molly	Australian cattle dog x	f	adult	1	*The Loner's Guarded Heart*
Monty	golden retriever	m	adult	2	"Dog Tags" in *Love Bites*
Monty	Great Dane	m	adult	1	*The Redemption of Rico D'Angelo*
Mooch	crossbreed	m	adult	1	*A Time for Home*
Moses	Newfoundland x	m	puppy	1	*The Cop, the Puppy and Me*
Mr Smith	dachshund	m	adult	2	*The Other Side of Us*
Muffin	cocker spaniel	m	adult	1	*A Dog and a Diamond*
Nathan	dachshund	m	adult	4	*No One Like You*
Newman	Labrador	m	adult	4	*The Search*
Noel	bloodhound	f	adult	1	*Montana Christmas Magic*
Oreo	border collie	m	adult	5	*Forever Yours, Sweetheart*
Oscar	dachshund	m	adult	4	*No One Like You*

Otis	Great Dane	m	adult	1	*Love Me Again*
Ozzie	Pekingese	m	adult	4	"Secondhand Sam" in *The Truth About Cats and Dogs*
Peaches	golden retriever	f	puppy	1	*A Nanny in the Family*
Pearl	terrier	f	adult	4	*One Good Cowboy*
Peck	Labrador	m	adult	4	*The Search*
Penny	border collie	f	adult	2	"Dog Tags" in *Love Bites*
Pete	crossbreed	m	adult	4	*Getting Rid of Bradley*
Pickles	cavoodle	m	adult	3	*Never Say No to a Caffarelli*
Prince	Pekingese	m	adult	5	"Home for Christmas" in *Rescuing Christmas*
Princess	dachshund	f	adult	1	*Beauty and the Weiner*
Ralf	boxer	m	adult	4	*For Keeps*
Relish	cavoodle	m	adult	3	*Never Say No to a Caffarelli*
River Jack	not identified	m	adult	3	*Montana Secret Santa*
Rory	terrier	f	adult	2	*Bought for the Greek's Revenge*
Rosebud	bulldog	f	adult	1	*No Stranger to Scandal*
Rowdy	Jack Russell x	m	puppy	1	*Family Matters*
Ruby	Rottweiler	f	adult	4	*One Good Cowboy*
Rue	golden retriever	f	adult	4	*No One Like You*
Rusty	Irish setter	m	senior	2	*Old Dog, New Tricks*
Sadie	boxer	f	adult	3	*Unleashed*
Salsa	boxer	m	puppy	4	*For Keeps*
Samantha	Pekingese	f	senior	4	"Secondhand Sam" in *The Truth About Cats and Dogs*
Samson	German shepherd	m	adult	5	"Home for Christmas" in *Rescuing Christmas*
Sarge	bloodhound	m	senior	1	*The Comeback Girl*

Saul	golden retriever	m	senior	1	*Barking up the Wrong Tree*
Shilo	Great Dane	m	adult	1	*Until there Was You*
Sledge	German shepherd	m	adult	5	*A New Leash on Love*
Smiley	golden retriever	m	adult	1	*A Maverick for the Holidays*
Sophie	dachshund	f	adult	2	*Must Love Wieners*
Sterling	Chihuahua x dachshund	m	adult	4	*One Good Cowboy*
Steve	dachshund	m	adult	1	*Faking It*
Strudel	miniature schnauzer	f	adult	2	*The Other Side of Us*
Sugar	beagle x	f	adult	1	*Cooper's Charm*
Teddy Bear	chow x	m	adult	3	*Montana Secret Santa*
Tilly	German shepherd	f	senior	2	*The Aussie Next Door*
Tiny	Great Dane	m	adult	1	*Playing with Forever*
Tish	Chihuahua	f	adult	2	"Tailspin" in *The Truth About Cats and Dogs*
Titan	Labrador	m	adult	1	*Explosive Secrets*
Toby	crossbreed	m	adult	2	*Animal Magnetism*
Trooper	beagle x basset	m	adult	5	"Home for Christmas" in *Rescuing Christmas*
Truffle	Chihuahua	m	adult	2	*The Aussie Next Door*
Truffles	Labradoodle	f	adult	1	*The Tycoon's Marriage Deal*
Tulip	pit-bull x boxer	f	puppy	1	*About a Dog*
Turbo	beagle	m	puppy	5	*A New Leash on Love*
Twinkles	crossbreed	m	adult	2	*Animal Magnetism*
Tyson	beagle	m	puppy	5	*A New Leash on Love*
Valentine	Dalmatian	m	adult	2	*New York, Actually*
Viggy	Belgian Malinois	m	adult	1	*Run to Ground*

Violet	terrier x	f	adult	1	*Once in a Blue Moon*
Wilbur	golden retriever	m	adult	1	*Awakened by his Touch*
Wookie	wolfhound	m	adult	2	"Holiday Haven" in *Rescuing Christmas*
Yoghurt	bloodhound	f	adult	1	*Tom Bradley's Babies*
Young Pete	Labrador	m	senior	1	*Riverbend Road*