



PUPPY LOVE FOR
THE VETERINARIAN

Amy Woods

 *Cherish*™

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Puppy Love For The Veterinarian

Аннотация

A New Leash On LoveWhen June Leavy finds two puppies abandoned outside during a storm, she immediately feels a bond with the adorable animals. Swindled out of her life savings by her no-good ex, she, too, was left with nothing but heartache and struggles of her own. But when she arrives at the local veterinary clinic, June is met by dangerously handsome Dr. Ethan Singh, whose sexy smile threatens to disarm her hard-won emotional strength.Back in Peach Leaf, Texas, to recover from an ugly break-up, Ethan gently tends to the puppies and their charming caretaker. But as the storm rages, so does the electric attraction between Ethan and June. Is this real, or a cruel phantom of lost love? Stranded alone at the clinic, only one thing is certain: They've got all night to figure it out...

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“Of course I’m not going to stop you from leaving, June. But I have to tell you, I don’t think it’s safe, and I’d really rather you not put yourself in any more danger than you already have today.”

Ignoring the fact that this man shouldn’t care about her well-being so much, June ran through all of her options in her head—all zero of them. She sighed. He was right. She was stuck there for the foreseeable future. She’d never in her life experienced such a dangerous storm, and she definitely didn’t know how to safely travel in one. Besides, she had the puppies to think of now. The minute she’d picked them up, they’d become her responsibility, and she couldn’t just abandon them with a doctor who had other patients to care for, especially one who was only temporarily managing his father’s clinic.

She looked up at Dr. Singh, who appeared almost as uneasy as she.

“I hate to break it to you, June, but under the circumstances, the smartest thing for you to do is to spend the night here with me.”

* * *

Peach Leaf, Texas:

Where true love blooms

Puppy Love for the Veterinarian

Amy Woods



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AMY WOODS took the scenic route to becoming an author. She's been a bookkeeper, a high school English teacher and a claims specialist, but now that she makes up stories for a living, she's never giving it up. She grew up in Austin, Texas, and lives there with her wonderfully goofy, supportive husband and a spoiled rescue dog. Amy can be reached on Facebook, Twitter and her website, www.amywoodsbooks.com.

This one is for the animal rescuers; thank you for the wonderful lives you save. And for my Maggie dog, who has my heart.

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“June, hon, why don’t you go on home now? I can finish closing up here myself, and it looks like things may get worse than they originally predicted.”

June Leavy looked up from her mop bucket and followed the owner of Peach Leaf Pizza’s eyes to the small television behind the counter, tuned in to the evening weather segment. January in west Texas could be unpredictable, but the idea of the twelve to eighteen inches of snow the meteorologist called for actually covering the ground and sticking was just surreal.

She studied her boss’s face, not missing the lines around Margaret’s mouth and the shadowy thumbprints beneath the older woman’s usually lively eyes. It had been a busy day, amid

a busy week; they were both exhausted, but the work would be completed much faster with two pairs of hands.

June shook her head, causing a few more strands of hair to escape her ponytail. “Nonsense. I’m almost finished with the floor, and then all that’s left is taking out the garbage.”

Margaret offered a weary smile as her thanks, but June could see the relief in her boss’s face. She would never admit it, but Margaret Daw was getting older. It was time for her to retire and June could feel that the day was coming when her boss would ask her to take over. Margaret had all but asked her about it on more than one occasion—who could blame a new grandma for wanting to spend more time with the adorable twin babies recently born to her pediatrician son and daughter-in-law?—and besides, June was her only full-time employee and comanager. In many ways, it just made sense.

June sighed and sloshed the mop back into the gray water, wondering again how she would respond if and when the day arrived. She could see the pros and cons list she’d pored over so many times in her mind’s eye, her options jotted out clear as day on the yellow pad sitting next to the remote control on her coffee table. But no matter how many times she mulled over the bullet points, the decision wouldn’t be easy.

Margaret was a wonderful boss—kind and fair—and the job provided steady income. There was something comforting in the daily tasks, in kneading the dough each morning, chopping fresh vegetables and taking orders, in the warm, familiar faces

of Peach Leaf Pizza's many regular customers. She would miss the banter, catching up with people she'd known her whole life and the excitement in kids' faces when they piled into the red leather booths after winning baseball games or performing well in dance recitals.

But she had dreams of her own, too.

And until recently, June had been so close to turning them into reality. So close, in fact, that the bruises from losing everything hadn't yet healed.

Now her choice was between picking up the pieces and starting over—letting herself believe that she could somehow regain what was lost—or sticking with the safe option, taking over the pizza parlor and borrowing her neighbors' joy as they lived their lives.

Put that way, it didn't seem like much of a choice at all, but she reminded herself that starting over wouldn't exactly guarantee a happy ending, either.

"Back to square one," she said aloud without meaning to.

"What's that?" Margaret called from the counter.

"Oh... I was just wondering if it's really going to get as bad as they're saying."

She tilted her chin at the television, where the Austin meteorologist gesticulated animatedly, her arms waving in circles and lines to indicate high and low pressure points across a multicolored map of Texas.

"Beats me." Margaret shrugged, her shoulders tapping the

pizza-slice painted earrings she wore so that they swirled around beneath her silvery curls. “Wouldn’t be the first time, though, you know.”

June finished cleaning a blotch of spilled marinara and pushed the wheeled bucket toward the back of the shop, doing a once-over of the black-and-white checked tiles in case she missed a spot.

Margaret wiped the last bit of counter and stood on her tiptoes to turn off the TV before removing her apron. “When I was a girl, we got a couple of feet out at our house, and I’ll tell you, it is no easy time getting around town in that much powder.” She put a hand on one hip and pointed at June with the other. “Especially when nobody around here knows how to drive in that stuff.”

Nodding her agreement, June crossed the kitchen and emptied the mop bucket into the designated sink, then shoved the cleaning supplies into a broom closet. She supposed it was possible that the weather might take a turn for the worse—it had been snowing steadily for a few days, so there was already a little covering the ground—but the thought of that much more coming down in the span of just a few hours in their neck of Texas still somehow didn’t seem realistic. Sure, they got a few inches most years, and there was always the danger of ice, especially on the country roads outside of town, but she didn’t think there was too much to worry about. She was certain she had plenty of time to get home before anything major hit.

But when she closed the supply closet door and turned around,

June found Margaret looking up at her from all of nearly five feet, her boss's clear blue eyes fully of worry beneath a forehead creased with concern.

“Just promise me you'll be extra careful, and if it gets bad, we won't open tomorrow. Just stay home. I don't want you getting hurt trying to make it into work, you hear?”

June gave a reassuring smile, promised that she'd be safe and patted Margaret's shoulder. Over the years, their relationship had deepened into more than just a typical owner/employee situation. Her boss treated her more like a daughter than a paid worker, which only made things harder when thinking about the next chapter of her life. She knew Margaret would hate the idea of June factoring her needs into future plans, but they were a factor. A big one. If she ever got back on her feet, if she ever found a way to get back all the money she'd spent years carefully saving to open her own bakery, she would have to leave someone she cared about, someone who'd helped see her through the lowest point of her life. That mattered. Deeply.

She shook her head. There was no use thinking about it now.

The money was gone. In all likelihood, that meant her dreams were gone with it. She'd worked herself to the bone for over a decade earning it and had gone without quite a few comforts to save until it amounted to enough to buy her own bakeshop. Her shoulders sunk as the weight of loss settled once again. It would take years before she could build her former financial stability and credit back up, and even more to get her savings back.

Six months had passed since Clayton left, taking everything with him. Their money. Hers, really, if she were being honest, and she was now—too much had happened for anything less. Her dreams.

And, last but not least, her heart.

Even after all he'd done, taking the cash from their joint account and running off to gamble it away in Vegas, June thought there might be a place inside of her that still missed that stupid man. It wasn't that she loved him still—no, he'd broken her trust and hurt her far too much for that to be the case—but the loss of him and all they'd shared, and the deep chasm of loneliness in his wake, the death of the life they'd built together... June thought maybe those were the things she truly mourned. And it wasn't that she needed him, either, or any man, for that matter. She'd been single for most of her life until Clayton came along and had been happy and fulfilled before his presence.

But that was just it. Until he left, she would have sworn to anyone that he was the one she'd spend the rest of her life with, and when he'd gone, all those promises of a family and a life with him vanished, and she was back where she'd been before—only this time, it wasn't the same. This time, she knew what it was like to share her home with someone she loved, to talk about having kids one day and to dream together, staring off into the future, side by side. This time, she felt the absence.

Shoulders up, chin up, she told herself, remembering Margaret's wise words in the aftermath of that mess. Better to

make peace with the present, than to dwell on the past, right?

Of course.

Starting with her small, albeit cozy, apartment, June forced herself to make a list of all of the things she had to be grateful for. When she finished, she headed back to the storefront and kitchen to fetch the two large trash bags, hefting them over her shoulders to carry through the restaurant to the Dumpster in the loading area out back.

Things weren't so very bad. She had her job, her friends and a warm place to live, and for that she was thankful. It was a good thing right now to be single and free, to have time and space to decide what to do next, what path to take in putting her life back together. No strings, no one else to care for, no one to put before her own needs. She planned on staying that way for a good while; it would take someone very special to convince her to put her trust in a relationship again, and she was fairly convinced that person might not be anywhere in her future, near or far. It was a...difficult thought to swallow, but one she was doing her best to accept.

June dropped the trash bags near the back door and went to get her coat. Margaret was doing the same. "Bundle up, now."

"Yes, ma'am," she teased, holding her fingers to her forehead in a salute.

Margaret put both hands on her hips, a foreboding figure. "I'm not joking around, Junie. You forget I'm from upstate New York, where it gets dangerously cold in the winter. You Texans don't

know from cold, and you're always caught unawares when it hits. Don't let it get the best of you."

"Okay, I promise."

Both women pulled on gloves, hats and purses, and Margaret opened the back door for June when she picked up the garbage bags. A blast of frigid air slapped her across the face and briefly challenged her footing until she steadied herself against its force.

"I'm good here, Marg. I'll drop these off and lock up. See you in the morning," she shouted over her shoulder as she stepped onto the loading dock and into what felt like gale-force winds.

"I'm not so sure about that."

June chuckled to herself. "Okay, then, see you soon."

"All right, hon. Don't forget what I said about not coming in if it's bad," Margaret called, her voice fading as the back door slammed behind her and she headed for her car in the front parking lot, which she always parked next to June's fifteen-year-old jalopy.

June shook her head at the older woman's cossetting, then heaved the bags into the giant metal bin, starting at the loud clanging sound that erupted.

Something else must have heard it, too, and reacted the same way, because June caught motion in her peripheral vision as she turned back to lock up the door. Her heart jumped into her throat, and it fluttered there like so many trapped butterflies as she spun quickly to take in her surroundings.

"Hello?"

She listened carefully and heard...nothing, except maybe her own pulse pounding at her temples.

“Is anyone out here?” she called again, reaching into her purse for her pocketknife and cell phone. There was probably nothing to worry about. This was Peach Leaf, after all, where the running crime rate was pretty much zilch. All the same, she was a woman alone in an alley after dark, so it was only smart to be cautious.

Scanning the view once more to make certain she wasn't about to be attacked, June decided that instead of locking the back door and walking around front to her little car as she usually did, she'd just go through the store.

That was when she heard something again. A quiet rustling, followed by what sounded like a series of soft squeaks. She closed her eyes for just a few seconds, trying to decide whether or not to ignore the sound, knowing the wise thing to do was to walk away. Whatever it was, it was not her problem, and Lord knew she did not need any of those in her life just then.

But then she heard it again, and this time, the soft, sad little cries were like warm fingers squeezing her heart. As the snow began to fall harder, flakes catching in her eyelashes and forming a thin, shawl-like layer on the red fabric of her coat, June released a great sigh and made the decision to investigate. Whatever was making that noise—please don't let it be a baby of any kind, she thought—did not belong out there in a lonely alley on a freezing winter's night.

With the garbage bags out of her hands, June now pulled her

coat closer around her and closed all four toggles before carefully descending the loading dock steps. A thin layer of ice had already formed, and she had no intention of tumbling down and breaking a bone or two. She pulled her purse strap up from her shoulder and over her head to secure it tightly, then dug out her cell phone, turning on the flashlight app. Its slim, bright beam shot out into the dark, and June crept slowly behind the pizza shop's garbage bin, the light illuminating nothing but a coating of grimy snow. She stopped and waited a moment, listening for the sound again so she could follow it to its source. Just as she was about to restart her search, she heard it again; this time, it was more distinct.

Placing a palm behind her ear, June tried to zero in on what it was—a kitten, maybe? Something small and helpless and lost? Again, she pleaded that it wouldn't be a baby. The thought of someone leaving a little one behind their restaurant, especially in this weather, was just...unthinkable.

There it was again, and now she was certain it was some sort of cry. Rolling her eyes upward in a silent prayer, she braced herself and started off in the direction of the noise, continuing as it became louder and louder, which meant she must be close. She was halfway down the alley, almost to the street, when she reached it, hidden in a dark corner behind another garbage bin.

Shining her flashlight into the shadows, June gasped, cold air filling her lungs and what felt like the rest of her body. The hand that wasn't holding her phone flew to her mouth as she looked into two pairs of big, brown eyes.

Big, brown...puppy eyes.

The squeaking, she now realized, was the heart-wrenching sound of tiny little canine yips, probably calling for their mother.

There, cuddled together in a heap of trash behind another store's Dumpster, were two itty-bitty bodies coated in black fur, with eight little white, black-spotted boots. But their tiny faces were the clincher. June's eyes filled with moisture, not from the biting air, as she stared at two pairs of fuzzy black ears, each separated down the middle by a thin line of white fur that traced down into identical white muzzles.

For a full minute, June remained frozen in place, her instinct telling her to rush forward and gather the pups in her arms to warm them up, but she wasn't yet positive on what was the right thing to do.

On the one hand, the temperatures had probably dropped to below freezing when the sun had disappeared—at least, it sure felt that way—but on the other, well, what if the puppies' mother returned, looking for them? What if she was around there somewhere and returned to find them gone? But the more pressing question was, of course—what if she didn't? The little ones couldn't have been out there for too long; otherwise they'd be...

No, she didn't want to think about that. Yet...that would certainly be the outcome if she didn't get the little dogs out of the cold, and quick. She could always check the alley the next day and put up flyers to find out if anyone had seen a female dog

wandering around the strip mall or a suspicious person dropping off a little bundle. But for now, if she didn't get them out of the increasingly cold night air—and the snow that seemed to be falling faster and thicker each minute—they would surely freeze to death. Not much of a choice there.

Having made up her mind, June hurried forward and opened her coat, then picked up the puppies very gently and with extreme care, and tucked them into the front pouch of her Peach Leaf Pizza sweatshirt. She wrapped her coat across her middle, leaving it unfastened so they could breathe, and, head down, turned the corner out of the alley.

The wind was much fiercer without the protection of the buildings, and the several yards to her car seemed more like miles as June trudged through the now-blinding wind and snow in the direction of the front parking lot. Finally, she reached her car and pulled her keys from her purse to unlock the doors. Opening the trunk, she retrieved her gym bag and slammed down the lid, sliding into the backseat as quickly as possible. She pulled the door shut—no easy feat against the wind—and took a deep breath before unzipping the bag. She took out her jogging clothes and shoes, leaving her towel to make a sort of nest. Opening her coat, she removed the little balls of fluff and placed them carefully inside, close against each other for warmth.

“There,” she said. “You guys hang on tight. We’re going for help.”

Satisfied with the answering squeaks, June pulled a seat belt

around the bag and fastened it, hoping it would do, and then crawled into the front seat. Thankfully, her old car started after just a couple of tries, and she was able to pull out of the parking lot.

Snow fell in sheets as she made her way onto the main road with her blinkers on full blast, sifting through her memory for any winter-weather driving advice Margaret might have offered over the years, sorry that she hadn't listened more closely.

Wrapping the fore-and middle fingers of her left hand together for luck as she gripped the wheel with white knuckles, June set off to the only place she could think of that might be able to help her with two very fresh puppies.

Chapter Two

Ethan Singh cursed before his father's absurdly messy monster of a desk. One of these days, he promised himself for the hundredth time, he would have to suck it up and organize the damn thing. One of these days.

But not today. Or tonight, he supposed, strolling from the office and past the empty receptionist's desk to glance out the front window of his father's veterinary clinic, only mildly surprised to find a dark sky staring back. It was almost a relief to know that, as soon as he arrived at his parents' home and ate a quick dinner, it would be past time to head straight to bed.

Straight to bed meant no time to think about what he was doing in Peach Leaf, Texas, for the winter, and more importantly, what he would do when the season was over and it was time to

head back to campus in Colorado, where he was scheduled to teach several veterinary classes over the spring semester.

Ethan gave his head a little shake and turned back from the window. It wouldn't do to ruminate on that now. The whole point in coming here, agreeing to run Dad's clinic while his parents took a one-month, long-overdue vacation to visit his father's brother in Washington, DC, was to not think about what happened in Alaska. Ethan sat down in the receptionist's seat and put his head in his hands. How could he not think about it? How could he not think about her—about what she'd done to break his heart into a thousand tiny shreds?

It was impossible.

He had looked forward to that research trip with great enthusiasm, knowing he'd get to spend every day with Jessica Fields, the incredibly intelligent and physically stunning colleague he'd been dating for a couple of weeks, following her recent arrival at his department at the university. And he'd gotten everything he wanted. Their time in northernmost Alaska, a place he'd learned both to love and respect for its extreme beauty and danger, had been absolutely perfect. The team's research on the impact of climate change and infectious disease in polar bears advanced far beyond what they'd initially anticipated, and so had his relationship with Jessica.

It wasn't until their final day that she'd begun to show signs of unease that any scientist worth his salt would have noticed. When he'd leaned in to kiss her on the flight back to Colorado,

an action that at that point in their time together had become commonplace, Jessica had pulled away, and he confronted her.

She wasn't single, she said, her eyes full of regret but not, he'd noted sadly, remorse. She was engaged to marry her college sweetheart and had no plans to break it off on account of what she called a "fling." She had led him on, she said.

Well, on that point he certainly would not argue. Sleeping with him, telling him she loved him, making plans with him...yes, he'd say she was damn right that she'd led him on. Ethan had immediately requested an alternative seat on the airplane, enduring the remainder of the flight with a clenched jaw, knotted stomach and the blinding urge to scream at the woman who had, in the space of a few months, turned his life upside down, and then quickly and heartlessly destroyed him.

The department head, though confused at his hasty, fictional explanation, had granted Ethan's request for a short sabbatical, a semester off. Ethan hadn't taken a vacation since accepting the position five years before, and he supposed he was due a break. Though it hurt, not to get started right away on compiling and writing up the Alaskan data for conference presentations. He would never forget the way his breath had caught and his heartbeat raced as he'd knelt next to one of those regal bears to take a blood sample before the tranquilizer wore off. They were the most beautiful creatures he'd ever seen; they deserved saving and he would spend the rest of his life working to do just that.

He pushed out a breath, lifting his head to stare out the

window once more as he listened to wind that had begun to swirl and howl. For now, he needed time—even just a few months—to figure out how to go back to the university and face Jessica, who had made it clear she had no plans to leave the team, despite what she'd done to him. He needed to come to terms with the fact that the only woman he'd ever fallen for was getting married to someone else and, worst of all, didn't seem to give a single damn what it would do to him.

In the meantime, he had the clinic, and over the past two weeks, he had to admit, he'd become fond of the locals and their beloved pets, and even of his house calls to care for a few horses and cattle on nearby ranches. He'd always loved the research part of being a veterinary pathologist, but this...this change of pace and reminder of where his career had begun, was nice, too, at least for now.

Ethan's head jerked up at the sound of raucous banging. It took him a minute to realize that it was coming from the front door, which he'd locked an hour ago after closing. Who on earth could be knocking—no, pounding—on the door now? Ethan knew that his father occasionally extended his workday beyond its normal twelve hours when a special circumstance arose, but no one had called to say they'd be coming in late or anything of the like.

He got up from the chair quickly, leaving it swiveling as he paced to the door. Whoever stood on the front stoop wasn't visible from the window he'd been looking out before, and the

blinds were pulled down on the other side to cover the spot where the sun hit in late afternoon; he'd have to get much closer and peer through them to identify his visitor.

Ethan rolled his eyes. Yes, it was his duty to help out the local animal population in any way he could, but the day had already been particularly trying—several regular exams on top of two challenging, back-to-back house calls—and he practically ached to warm up a frozen meal, shower away the fur and jump into the cozy bed in his parents' guest room.

When he got to the door, he slid a finger between two blinds and peered out, but the snow was quite thick now, surprisingly so, and the visitor so bundled up that he couldn't make out anything other than the bright crimson of a coat and matching hat. He didn't even see any animals. But the wind was so fierce, and the snow falling in such a thick blanket, that he was compelled to open the door and let the poor person in, reminding himself that this was Peach Leaf, therefore generally void of a large city's potential threats.

Bracing himself, Ethan unlocked and pulled open the door, breath rushing from his lungs as the icy air hit. A tall figure rushed forward, nearly pummeling him to get inside the building, and for a second he regretted his decision to be kind.

"Oh, thank you," came a voice, definitely a woman's, from somewhere in the depths of the coat and beanie. Ethan closed the door behind her.

"Thank you so, so much for letting me in. I thought there

might not be anyone here this late and I was about to turn around and go back to my car, but...”

“Whoa, there. Hang on just a minute. Let’s start at the beginning. How does that sound?” He clasped his hands in front of his abdomen and gave her some space.

The woman stopped speaking and pulled up her hat, which had fallen down into her face, nearly covering what he now saw were large, green—a very lovely green, in fact—eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said, pushing out a puff of air. She reached out a gloved hand in Ethan’s direction and he took it, startled to discover how cold it was.

She must be absolutely frozen from head to toe. He’d checked the thermometer that afternoon and, even before the sun had gone down, the temperature was below freezing. If he hadn’t let her in, she might have been in real trouble. His semester in Alaska had taught him plenty about the dangers of extreme cold, and even though they were in Texas, which was generally mild, the hazards were the same if one wasn’t careful. It didn’t matter that the weather was out of the norm; it simply was, and therefore caution would need to be observed.

He hadn’t anticipated things getting so bad, and hadn’t much of a chance to pay attention to the forecast other than his brief check on the internet as he’d scarfed down a sandwich earlier, but now he could see plainly that the winter storm the meteorologists predicted had escalated quickly.

The woman pumped his hand up and down a few times before

letting it go. “I’m June. June Leavy. I came by on the slim chance that Dr. Singh might still be here this late, and, well, I didn’t really know what else to do.”

“I’m Dr. Singh,” Ethan said, doing his best to offer a warm smile despite feeling anything but.

The woman—June—narrowed her eyes and tilted her head to study him, chuckling softly. “Wow, Dr. Singh, I have to say, you look like you’ve stumbled upon the elusive fountain of youth.”

Ethan had to laugh at that. Most folks, unless their pets were ill or aging, only came in for annual checkups and vaccinations. It made sense that the senior Dr. Singh would not have had a chance to inform all clients of his winter vacation plans.

“No, I mean, I am Dr. Singh, but perhaps not the one you’d hoped to find. I’m his son Ethan.”

June’s face visibly relaxed as realization hit and she nodded, then proceeded to remove her gloves and hat. As she grasped her lapels and moved to take off her coat, Ethan noticed the bit of roundness at her middle and the thought crossed his mind that she might be pregnant. “Here, let me help you with that,” he said, taking her coat.

He couldn’t help but catch the subtle, sweet scent of her hair as he pulled the red fabric from her shoulders. Like melon, he thought. Odd that he should even notice. Odder still he should notice that it tumbled down her shoulders in soft, auburn waves, framing a face, he could see after he’d turned back from hanging her coat on an iron rack near the door, that was rosy from the

cold and, well, quite lovely.

June smiled, and it occurred to Ethan that she was aptly named. Her skin was as bright as sunshine and the curve of her wide mouth heated his insides, head to toe. Her eyes were lively and warm like summer, although...her smile didn't quite reach them.

Not that he cared, though. Pure observation—like you'd get from any good scientist.

“Thank you,” she said. “Now, as I was saying, I drove here on my way home from work and my car broke down about, well, I don't really know how far away, but it sure seemed like a long distance.” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes as if willing calm. “Anyway, I'm here now and you're here, thank goodness.”

Ethan must have looked confused, and that would make sense because he definitely was. He was glad to help if she was stranded. Perhaps he could call a tow truck for her and let her stay to wait out the storm, but other than that, he wasn't at all sure why she'd been headed this way in the first place.

When she stopped speaking, he took the chance to ask, “Is there something I can do to help you, Miss Leavy?”

“Actually, yes, there is. At least, I hope so.”

His heart seemed to speed up as she bit her bottom lip and reached into the pocket of her sweatshirt with both hands. Not that he thought she would pull out a weapon, per se, but because he knew instinctively that nothing she might reveal would be easy to deal with. And what he wanted at that moment, and more than

that, for his life in general right then, was just that—simplicity.

But that was simply not in the cards.

So when June Leavy pulled two shivering black-and-white puppies out of her pocket and held them out to show him why she'd driven to his office, walked an unknown distance in a freak snowstorm and nearly pounded down the door, all Ethan Singh could do was sigh.

Chapter Three

As June stared at the junior Dr. Singh awaiting a response, the skin between his brows bunched into a frown over eyes that were cool and impassable, despite what she'd just revealed, making it impossible to determine what he thought of her unannounced arrival on his doorstep. Or rather, their arrival.

She knew it was late, that it would be an inconvenience to stop in without even a phone call when the veterinary office had closed over an hour before, but she didn't know what else to do with the two little bundles. She didn't know this man—Ethan, he'd said—but she knew his father, a kind, attentive doctor whose smiles could soothe even the saddest of children when their pets were sick, and for now, that was enough to give her hope that maybe that man's son wouldn't turn her, or her little charges, away on such an awful night.

June hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath until he reached out both hands to take the puppies from her. Letting the air slowly from her lungs, she watched as he tucked them under his arms the same way she had when she'd discovered them in

the alley.

“We need to get them warmed up,” he said, getting right to business. Ethan turned from where they still stood near the door and lifted a shoulder to motion for her to follow as he headed toward the examination rooms.

June had been in this office many times when her beloved cat reached his twilight years. Being there again caused memories to resurface that she hadn't prepared for when she'd made the impulsive decision to stop in, hoping someone would be there to save two little lives. Trailing behind the doctor, she focused instead on the waves of dark hair that just brushed the collar of his white coat and the broad span of his shoulders. Something about the look of him—the stormy but not unkind dark eyes, the beautiful shade of his skin, like black tea with a bit of milk stirred in, and his height, which had to be considerable to reach well over her own six feet—worked to unravel the tight ball that had formed in her belly.

Driving there in what now seemed to be a full-blast snowstorm was one of the scariest things June had ever done. It was lucky that she knew the roads as well as she did, having lived in Peach Leaf her whole life; otherwise, she wasn't sure there would have been much of a chance of making it this far, not to mention the likelihood that she and the puppies would not have survived if they'd stayed in the car. And until the extreme weather passed, it was impossible to tell what had caused her old lemon to die. Terror had struck when the engine coughed and gave up, the snow

coming down so hard as the wind blew fiercely that she could barely see a foot in front of her. She'd followed the road as best she could and somehow, thankfully, had made it to the office.

What was probably only half a mile or so had become a nearly impossible journey until the glass door of the clinic came into view. And now there she was. There hadn't been time to mull over the next step—how she would get home with no working vehicle, especially with the weather throwing such a fit.

At least now she wasn't alone. Even though he didn't seem too happy to see the three of them—and really, who could blame him?—June knew somehow that he would do his best to help. Then they would just have to go from there.

Dr. Singh stopped in front of one of the exam rooms and lifted his chin toward the door, presumably asking June to open it, which she did quickly. When they were all in the room, he held the puppies out to her. “Okay, I need you to hold them for a moment. I'll be right back.”

The apprehension she felt must have been poorly hidden because when he saw the look on her face Ethan's stoicism seemed to evaporate briefly; his eyes softened and the thin, serious line of his lips was replaced by a curve at one corner of his mouth that could almost pass for a grin.

“It's okay, Miss Leavy. I'll be right back, I promise. I just need to get some supplies, and it would help if you'd keep the puppies warm for just a moment longer. Can you do that for me?”

June nodded. She'd gotten the babies that far, but the thought

of being responsible for them any longer seemed more daunting now as the stress of the day compounded and the idea hit her suddenly that they might not make it. Even now, in the safety of the clinic, with a trained veterinarian to help, the chance remained that the little ones might not pull through.

“Good,” he responded, nodding. “You had a great idea earlier, keeping them close together in your pocket. That way, they had each other’s warmth, plus that coming from your body.”

A little flutter passed through her chest at the mention of her body coming from Dr. Singh’s mouth, but she just shook her head and took back the little bundles of fur, tucking them into her sweatshirt once more.

“All set?” he asked.

“Yes, I think so.”

At that, he left the room and June concentrated on snuggling the little pups close, willing her warmth to be enough to keep them alive. She couldn’t tell how they were doing, other than that the tiny heartbeats she’d felt for before were still thumping softly, and their sweet brown eyes were open. With any luck, that meant they were okay, but a part of her warned that there could be any number of things wrong on the inside.

She swallowed and closed her eyes, and a moment later Dr. Singh returned with what looked like a pile of fluffy towels. He placed the bundle on the exam table and moved to the bench where June sat, wrapping one around her shoulders and gently settling the warm terry cloth in place, a gesture that was

completely logical considering that she still shivered from the cold, but also surprisingly intimate. She couldn't recall the last time a man had done something so simple and caring for her, and before she could think about it, she found herself gazing up at him with a warm smile.

"Thank you," she said. "That feels...wonderful."

"You're quite welcome. We've got a small washer and dryer in the staff room, so I warmed these up for a minute or two."

As he spoke, though he didn't exactly return her smile, soft crinkles formed at the outer corners of those deep brown eyes and it struck her just how exceptionally attractive this man was. She hadn't even known that the older Dr. Singh had a son, but then, they'd only shared a doctor/patient-parent relationship, so it made sense that he wouldn't have gone into detail about his family.

Strangely, now, June very much wished he had.

Ethan went back to the table and returned with another towel, kneeling to spread it on the floor at her feet. He sat cross-legged in front of it. "Here, let's put the pups in this while I take a look at them. Safer than having them up on the table for now."

June nodded and retrieved them from her pocket one at a time, cringing as they squeaked in protest at the brief separation. "Do you think..." She swallowed. "Will they be all right?"

"It's hard to know until I can look them over," he said, wrapping the towel around the puppies. "But I will say this." He looked up at her. "You've done a great job here, keeping them

warm and bringing them in. From what I can see so far, I think they have a good chance, all because of you.”

June’s insides melted a little at his compliments, but she wouldn’t feel better until she knew the puppies would be okay.

After a few moments, Dr. Singh pulled the towel to one side and very gently moved one puppy closer to him, stroking it softly behind the ears with one hand as he ran his fingers over each tiny limb, probably feeling for broken bones. He then felt the pup’s adorable pink tummy, almost grinning when the little guy—she could see plainly now that the term was accurate—closed his eyes.

June placed her nervous hands into the pouch of her hoodie, crossing her fingers.

“It’s a good sign that they don’t mind being held,” Ethan said, using a thumb to gently pry the animal’s mouth open, examining its tiny teeth before listening to its heart with the stethoscope that circled his neck. “Their friendliness toward humans will certainly make it easier to place them in homes when the time comes,” he pointed out matter-of-factly. “Where did you say you found them?”

June cleared her throat, surprised at how much she disliked talk of giving the puppies away, even though she had no intention of keeping them for herself. “Behind the pizza shop, where I work.”

The doctor winced, then looked up and met her eyes, listening intently as she spoke.

“We were done for the day, and I went out to toss the garbage. That’s when I found them behind a Dumpster.” Her throat threatened to close up as she thought again of someone leaving two little dogs in the icy alley.

“Any idea how long they were there?”

June shook her head. “No. I wish I had more to tell you, but unfortunately, that’s it. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Well, you did precisely the right thing, though it would appear you endangered yourself attempting to make it here. These are quite the lucky little guys, having been discovered by someone like you. Their fate might have been much worse, as I’m sure I don’t have to tell you.” An unmistakable wave of sadness crossed over the veterinarian’s face.

“I wasn’t thinking about that. I just wanted them to be okay...still do.”

Ethan nodded and set down the first pup, picking up the other—a girl—to go through the same exam. “There’s a good chance they will, thanks to you.” Finished, he tucked the brother and sister back into their towel and folded his hands together in his lap.

“So, how’s it look?” she asked, nails digging into her palms.

Ethan stared at her, his eyes warmer now, perhaps resigned to the outcome of his evening. She hadn’t even considered that he might have plans...perhaps a wife at home waiting for him. Then again, he wasn’t wearing a ring and he hadn’t texted or called anyone upon her arrival, or once he’d realized that he would be

at work for a bit longer.

“Well, I’ll have to do some blood work within the next few days to get a full picture, but from what I can tell at this point, it seems they’ll be okay.”

Relief flooded through her at the optimistic statement.

“They’re about three and a half weeks old, give or take. No broken bones, healthy lungs and hearts, and their teeth are coming in, which is great news.”

“So they can eat solid food? We won’t have to feed them with a bottle?” June had to admit she was a little disappointed. The idea of holding the tiny puppies and feeding them sounded...nice. She had always wanted children, anyway, but after her experience with Clayton, she wasn’t sure she could trust anyone enough ever again to even think about building a life with another person. Another person who had the potential to break her heart. Maybe someday, if she ever had the time and energy to spare, she could have a little puppy just like these to care for. Maybe she could try letting herself love something again...one day...but it would take time, far more than she could spare with her life the way it was, working sixty-hour weeks at the pizza parlor just to pay her rent and keep her car in working shape. She hoped things wouldn’t be that way forever; it was a sobering thought.

“Yes, they can eat solid food, but we’ll need to mix it with some canine milk replacer that’s specially formulated for puppies. Cow’s or any other kind of milk would upset their tummies.”

For some reason, June grinned at the word, so much more fatherly and sweet than the more technical stomachs.

“Do you have that here?”

“Sure do. We’ve got plenty, and I can have my receptionist, Sadie, order more in the morning if need be.” He lifted a corner of the towel and glanced in at the puppies. “For now, we need to get them some water and get a little food in them. We won’t give them too much yet, as I don’t know what or how much they’ve been eating and I don’t want them to get bloated.”

June nodded as he stood and held out a hand to help her do the same, then knelt to pick up the squeaky bundle. He led her to the back area and into a room lined with shelves of food and medicine, handing over the puppies so he could scan the stock for what they needed.

“Ah, here we are,” he said, lifting a small bag from a top shelf.

He opened a cabinet and pulled out two shallow bowls, then headed to the back room, stopping at a sink to fill one with water. Into the other, he poured a small amount of pebble-size kibble. He grabbed a bottle from a nearby refrigerator and poured thin, white liquid on top, like milk on cereal. Placing the bowls on the floor in a corner, Ethan motioned for June to set down the towel. At the scent of the food, two little black noses began to wriggle and both humans laughed quietly.

“The little stinkers are cute, aren’t they?”

Ethan looked up at her as he spoke and this time his smile reached those gorgeous, mahogany eyes. She felt his gaze all the

way down into her middle, as warm and comforting as the towel he'd so recently wrapped around her shoulders.

"Very," she replied, her voice little more than the squeaky sound the puppies made.

Dr. Singh helped her to guide the puppies over to the bowls, and they watched with bated breath, waiting to see if the little ones would eat. Finally, both pups sniffed at the bowl of food and buried their faces in the kibble, and the sound of Ethan's and June's sighs of relief were audible.

As the dogs worked on their dinner, Ethan disappeared into the supply closet and returned holding what looked like a baby gate and paper towels. He set to work in the corner of the room, spreading out what June now saw were puppy pads, which he surrounded with the gate, creating a little pen. "All right. We'll settle them in here for a bit, give them a little time and see if they'll do their business, then we can put them to bed."

He looked up at June. "If I'm correct on their age, they should be able to go to the bathroom on their own."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if they're too young, they'll need a little help to go, but I'm hoping they're old enough." He winked at her. "Time will tell."

"Ah." June had never been around such young animals before; once again, she was thankful to have an ally who knew far more than she about this unexpected development in her evening.

"In the meantime, is there anything I can get you?"

Her stomach grumbled, reminding her that she hadn't yet eaten and it was almost nine o'clock, but she doubted there was much in the way of people food in a veterinary clinic. "I'd love something hot to drink. That is, if you have anything."

"Come," Dr. Singh said, holding out an arm. June walked through the door in front of him and he left it open, leading her to what had to be the staff break room, where he pulled a chair from a small, round table, motioning for her to sit.

She watched as he took a measuring cup from a cabinet and placed it on a hot plate before pulling milk from the fridge and what appeared to be a few spice bottles from a drawer.

"So tell me, Miss Leavy..."

"Please, call me June."

He set to work, mixing ingredients in the glass cup as though he were a chef in an upscale kitchen, rather than a very patient veterinarian in a small-town clinic. "June, then. Have you ever had chai?"

It was only one of her favorite drinks. "Oh, I love chai tea."

The doctor let out a chuckle as he stirred the mixture with a spoon.

"What's so funny?"

"Just chai. When you say chai tea, what you're really saying is tea tea. The word chai means tea in Hindi."

"Oh, goodness," she said, feeling like a doofus. "I'm sorry."

"Not at all," Ethan said, laughing.

June found she very much liked the deep, warm sound of it

tickling her ears. He seemed much more relaxed now than he had when she'd first arrived, almost certainly ruining his night.

"Is your family from India?" she asked, surprising herself. She supposed it wouldn't hurt to find something to talk about to pass the time until the storm let up and she could go on home.

"My father was born in Delhi and came here as a child."

"And your mother?"

"She's American, from New York. They've lived in Texas for most of my life, since my father opened this clinic."

It was quiet for a few moments as Ethan continued to stir the tea and June took a couple of deep breaths, allowing herself to calm down for the first time since she'd found the puppies over two hours ago. Her shoulders ached with tension and her tiredness reached all the way down to her bones; she longed for a hot shower and her bed. For once, she would be happy to go home to her lonely, closet-size apartment, where she hoped to get at least a couple hours of sleep before her alarm clock sent her back to work.

When she opened her eyes, Ethan set two steaming mugs on the table and June lifted hers to take a sip. The hot liquid soaked all the way down into her veins, warming her through and through, the sweet, yet spicy, flavors tingling her throat in an incredibly pleasant way. "Oh, my gosh," she said, rolling her eyes toward the roof, "this is amazing."

Ethan grinned, then took a sip from his own mug. "Better than Starbucks, huh?"

“Um, yeah. Way better. Apples and oranges better.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he said, taking a few more sips. He got up and went back to the counter, turning on a small television set to the same local weather she’d watched earlier with Margaret. She made a mental note to text her boss soon to make sure she’d made it home.

“We’d better see what’s going on out there,” he said, returning to the table. “It looked much worse than I thought it was when I opened the door and you brought an arctic blast in with you and those puppies.”

“It’s pretty bad. I’m hoping it will clear so I can get home soon.”

Ethan looked skeptical but didn’t say anything as they both turned to watch the screen. It only took a few minutes for them to learn that the weather had gotten worse as they’d been taking care of the dogs. According to the meteorologist, a mass of cold, dry Canadian air had moved south into their area to intersect with a warm, moist air mass moving north from the Gulf of Mexico. Evidently, the cold air had advanced and pushed away the warm air, orchestrating the crazy mess outside. Over a foot of snow had fallen on already-icy roads and the whole of Peach Leaf was now under a winter weather warning.

June put her elbows on the table and lowered her head into her arms. It would be hours before it would be safe to drive home...for a person who had a working ride.

“Well, June,” Ethan said, getting up to turn off the steady

stream of impending doom on the television. “Looks like you’re stuck with me for a while.”

“I... I can’t stay here. I’ve got to get home.”

Ethan tilted his head. “Not going to happen, at least not tonight. It’s really nasty out there—not anywhere close to safe for driving.” He finished the last of his tea and picked up both of their cups, carrying them to the sink.

“My car’s broken down, anyway. Surely I can at least get a tow truck out here. Maybe they can take me home.”

Ethan came back and sat down across from her at the table. “It’s not likely we’d be able to get a tow truck out here in this weather. I would drive you if I felt it was safe, but I’ve spent some time in Alaska and I’ve seen firsthand what can happen when people don’t heed weather warnings.” He paused, perhaps not wishing to sound overly concerned. “Of course, I’m not going to stop you from leaving, June, but I have to tell you, I don’t think it’s safe, and I’d really rather you not put yourself into any more danger than you already have today.”

Ignoring the fact that this man shouldn’t care about her well-being so much, June ran through all of her options in her head—all zero of them. She sighed. He was right. She was stuck there for the foreseeable future. She’d never in her life experienced such a dangerous storm and she definitely didn’t know how to safely travel in one. Besides, she had the puppies to think of now. The minute she’d picked them up, they’d become her responsibility, and she couldn’t just abandon them with a doctor who had other

patients to care for, especially one who was only temporarily managing his father's clinic.

She looked up at Dr. Singh, who appeared almost as uneasy as she.

“I hate to break it to you, June, but under the circumstances, the smartest thing for you to do is to spend the night here with me.”

Chapter Four

It took June longer than it should have to register what Dr. Singh—Ethan—had said. Mostly because, somehow, she'd gotten momentarily lost in those cinnamon eyes of his. The man was handsome in a way that could almost be described as beautiful, but his looks were also sort of unnerving at the same time, as though they had the potential power to unravel her completely.

It occurred to her that looks like his didn't really fit in with the men she was used to seeing in Peach Leaf, almost as though she'd woken up still inside a dream involving a movie set. Men who looked like Ethan Singh were generally employed as actors or male models...not small-town veterinarians. And they usually associated with other exceptionally attractive or powerful people, or in his case, highly educated people...people nothing like her.

Staring at him made her think of all the ways she couldn't quite measure up. Though she wasn't sure where that notion had even originated from. After all, why would she need to measure up at all?

It wasn't like he was interested in her, at least aside from his medical duty to assist her in getting the puppies healthy. He certainly wasn't interested in her as a woman, as well he shouldn't be, because she was not interested in him as a man.

Really, she was not.

She shouldn't be, at any rate, not after what she'd been through the past several months. No woman in her right mind would seek to get back out there after the burn she'd suffered. And even though she might not be thinking clearly, what with her only real possession stuck out in the snow enduring God only knew what horrors, which might prevent it from ever working again—and with this man staring at her with unmistakable amusement as she waited for appropriate words to arrive—she could at least be certain that she was, in fact, in her right mind.

With that, she cleared the cobwebs from her throat and finally spoke, hoping her voice wouldn't come out too rusty from lack of use.

“Um, okay. I guess that makes sense.” She swiped a hand across her forehead, suddenly warm despite the weather outside and the room's cool temperature.

“Of course it does,” Ethan answered, his tone final as if the issue had been decided and there was nothing more to be discussed. But June thought there was plenty in need of discussion. Like, for example, the fact that she was suddenly starving.

And not, it would seem as she found herself in danger of

falling deep into those eyes again, just for food.

The thought rushed in unbidden and was stuck there in her mind before she could stop it, meaning that the mature thing now would be to address where it had come from and what it meant. At some point. For now, feeling more ragged than she did after a double shift at work and hungrier than she could ever recall having been before, maturity was the last thing on her mind.

“Is something wrong?” the devastatingly handsome doctor asked, his voice even sexier thanks to its thick note of concern.

June shook her head. “No, it’s fine. Or in any case, I suppose it has to be.” She looked away from him and, not surprisingly, her mind was instantly clearer.

She would have to be careful around those eyes from now on, especially if she was meant to endure an entire night—possibly more, if the weather didn’t clear up—with a man who looked like he’d just walked out of the latest glossy issue of GQ.

He made her want things she shouldn’t want, things she couldn’t have.

“What is it, then?”

When she didn’t answer, he tilted his head like a curious puppy—like a ridiculously adorable, curious puppy.

“Come on now, I can tell you were thinking about something.”

Like a tickle of wind against her cheek, she sensed him staring at her, willing her to speak.

“It’s just that, well—” a hand flew to her stomach involuntarily “—I’m starving.”

Ethan threw his head back and laughed, the sound low and sultry and full of mischief, leaving June almost frustrated with his level of physical perfection. Couldn't he at least have an absurd-sounding, high-pitched laugh or something? Was there nothing about this guy that wouldn't make her want to kiss him?

It was just her luck—she should be used to this by now—to be stuck overnight with the most distractingly attractive guy she'd ever met, right after the absolute worst breakup she'd ever endured.

Come on, Junie, she chastised herself. That's about enough negativity for two lifetimes, don't you think?

Best to push on. Besides, with the cards she'd been dealt, what choice did she have?

“All right. What's so darn funny?” she asked.

“Nothing, really. It's just that here you are looking so incredibly serious and come to find out you're just hungry.”

“Hilarious,” she responded, this time allowing a hint of playfulness to escape. “But seriously, I haven't had anything to eat since lunch, which now seems like years ago. I know it might be useless to ask, but is there anything to eat around here? That is, anything we can get to without risking our lives.”

Ethan grinned, his full lips setting in motion a series of thoughts that she wasn't entirely certain were legal.

“Actually, this might be one problem we can solve.”

“Don't tease me now. I'm this close to sneaking some of that puppy kibble from the storage room.”

He laughed. “I wouldn’t dare. There’s a bakery a few doors down. It might be a rough trip, but I think if we stay right next to the building and, well, right next to each other, we can probably make it with only minimal danger.”

“Stay—” June swallowed “—next to each other?”

“Of course. For warmth.”

June felt her cheeks heat, hoping they weren’t turning as ghastly pink as they were in the habit of doing—the eternal curse of redheads like herself. “Yes, right. Warmth. Of course.”

It made perfect sense under the circumstances; it really did. But the mere thought of being near Ethan for the duration it might take them to reach sustenance raised her temperature enough that she was fairly certain she could comfortably walk all the way to her apartment in the wind that had begun to howl outside the clinic like a wild animal.

Without a coat.

* * *

“Let’s check on the puppies, get you bundled back up and see if we can’t get some food,” Ethan said, tossing his new companion a sweet smile. “I could go for some dinner myself.”

While that was definitely true—his stomach had been protesting against its emptiness since he’d seen his last patient, and that had been hours ago—there was another reason, equal in weight to the first, that he’d suggested leaving the office and grabbing something to eat.

That reason was June Leavy.

A few hours before, his life in Peach Leaf had been simple and clear, intentionally so.

This morning, he'd woken with a relatively muddled head for the first time since leaving Colorado.

Since he'd left her.

Sure, he still thought about his ex a few times a day still; that was perfectly normal following the demise of a serious relationship. But aside from those few painful moments, things had actually started to look up, and he'd gotten into a comfortable groove. Wake up and go for an early run, shower and eat breakfast, arrive at the clinic before sunrise to relieve the night technician and check on the overnight patients, work through his father's back-to-back appointments, breaking only for a quick lunch, and then go home after he'd completed evening rounds and closed up. He'd say goodbye to the staff and head home, too tired to think. Working from dark sky to dark sky suited him at this odd juncture in his life. The routine kept him busy and, most importantly, left little time for ruminating over all he'd left behind.

At least it had, until that evening, when June Leavy had burst through the door, literally bringing with her a blast of fresh air.

The image made him smile. As cold as it had been when she'd walked in, June was about as different from his frosty ex as she could be—a truth he didn't really want to examine closely.

But as beautiful as June was, as sweet and warm as he could clearly see she was even in the limited time they'd spent together,

the truth remained that her presence was simply not welcome.

She filled the room in a way that, while extremely pleasant—intoxicating, even—made him uncomfortable. Tall, bright in color and in mood and lively, June was impossible to ignore. Sharing a cup of tea with her had been difficult enough, but offering to let her stay the night—something he'd had no choice but to do on account of the growing danger outside—was going to take an iron will.

He didn't want her in his clinic, didn't want her on his mind. Being in the same room with her for the past while, as warm as she made him feel, he'd almost forgotten about the blizzard wailing away outside.

All of which was dangerous. What he needed was space, and a clear head.

Taking June for a bite to eat was the perfect solution. They were both hungry, and it would give him a chance to get a grip on whatever spark she'd ignited within him. Plus, he'd like to check on his father's business neighbors—the couple who owned the German bakery next door had been there for years and were close with his dad. They were elderly, and it would be good to make sure they were holding up through the freak snowstorm.

A blast of frigid air would do him good, and then he could figure out how to handle himself around June for the rest of the evening.

Things came to mind. So many things.

None of them realistic, or even appropriate for that matter.

A guy like him was in no position to be picturing those endless legs curled up next to his on the office sofa, for example, or better yet, wrapped around his middle as he kissed the daylights out of those undoubtedly soft lips and...

No. He couldn't let himself go there. Not again. It was stupid enough that he'd allowed his thoughts to wander this far. It seemed any time he ventured away from work for five minutes, he landed in trouble. He didn't want to be the sort of man who was so easily distracted by a pretty face and a pair of killer legs.

He looked up to find the object of his musings worrying her bottom lip as she studied him.

It wasn't sexy, the way she did that. Not at all.

The resultant swelling of those soft pink clouds did not affect him. Not in the least.

Also, he needed to check the thermostat—had it gotten warmer inside the clinic?

“So, what kind of place is it?” June asked, her cheeks slightly more flushed than they'd been when she first came in from the wind. Surely she wasn't...she couldn't possibly be having similar thoughts to the ones he'd been entertaining. The idea was absurd. He'd been radiating a cool demeanor and a general leave me alone, I'm busy attitude for weeks now that would put off any woman. More likely, she was just in a hurry to get out of there as much as he was.

“I mean what kind of food do they have?”

“Oh, well, there's the rub,” he answered, trying not to get

distracted again by those wicked lips, which had reddened to a pretty ruby shade—from the cold or from her nibbling, he no longer cared.

And what difference did it make, anyway?

It certainly didn't matter that they looked good enough to feast on himself, like fresh cherries ripe for the picking.

Dammit!

What the hell had they been talking about again?

“The rub?”

Ah, yes.

“It's just a little German bakery, you see. So we won't be able to get any real dinner. We'll have to skip straight to dessert. Hopefully it'll do until the weather lets up and you have a chance to head on your way.” A thought that disturbed him far more than he cared to acknowledge.

Something crossed her features very briefly—a shadowy hint of darkness, perhaps—and then disappeared.

Was it something he'd said that had so quickly stolen the light from her eyes?

He didn't have time to figure it out before she spoke again.

“Oh, that's right. How silly of me to forget. I've been working such weird hours the past few years that I haven't been to Bauer's in ages—I'd forgotten about the place until now.” Her features softened into wistfulness. “My mom used to take me there as a kid, on special occasions. They have the best pastry and...”

She blushed again and he wished to touch the crimson apples

on her cheeks. He enjoyed her rambling—quite a lot actually. But what good would it do to say so? After that night, she would be gone and he would go back to his temporary, if somewhat lonely, life.

Still, it was nice to see her talk about something so obviously important to her; it was nice to see inside her just a little.

“Anyway, I’m rambling, but that will be just fine. I’m so hungry I really don’t care what we eat, as long as it passes for food.”

“And is preferably intended for human consumption,” he teased, recalling her earlier comment about kibble, and wanting to restore her brightness.

“That would be great,” she said, beaming.

Pleased, he gestured for her to follow him to the back room and she did so. When they stepped through the door, the puppies were curled so tightly together that he and June had to check to make sure the little ones were both accounted for. After changing out the potty pad, they watched the critters sleep for a few moments, Ethan checking their breathing before he gently touched June’s elbow, whispered that the pups would be okay with only each other as company for a short while longer and led her out to the front of the clinic.

“I feel like I’m leaving my kids alone at home,” June said, shrugging into her coat, which he held open for her.

“I completely understand, and sadly, I don’t think this is their first time on their own,” Ethan said, wanting to reassure her, “but

we won't be long and I promise they'll be fine until we return."

What was he thinking, making a promise like that? Yes, the animals appeared relatively healthy and strong, considering their situation, and yes, he was confident in his ability to usher them back to full health, but he had no history of clairvoyance and therefore no business making guarantees regarding things he couldn't fully control.

What had gotten into him? Would he say anything to make this woman smile?

Catching the worried crease between her brows as she glanced once more over her shoulder in the direction of the pups, Ethan tucked his hand beneath her elbow. "Trust me, June. They'll be all right. Their bellies are full, they've had fresh water and have done their business, they're safe inside the pen and they're not alone."

The answer was yes, apparently, he would say anything.

At his words, her expression softened, and though he didn't want to examine why it mattered to him at all, he found himself relieved at the idea of having provided some comfort. "Also, I would not leave them if I believed them to be unsafe, okay?"

She nodded.

"So then, do you trust me?"

She wasn't quick to answer, a fact that made him like her even more. After all—though he wasn't entirely sure any longer whether he believed time to be a reliable factor in the decision to invest trust in someone—they'd only known each other for little

over an hour.

“Yes,” she finally said. “I do trust you.”

He smiled, more pleased than wisdom should allow.

“Good.” He squeezed her elbow, then let go. “I figure the best thing to do now is grab something to go and come back here. That way, we won’t risk getting stuck at the bakery. Even though it’s only a few yards away, we could end up unable to get back, and I don’t want to leave the puppies alone for a full night.”

“Sounds like a plan,” June agreed.

Ethan pulled on his coat and wrapped a scarf around his neck and face before donning his hat. By the time he’d finished, June had done the same and looked adorable, a description that, despite being worlds apart from characterizing the women he was typically attracted to, seemed somehow more enticing.

June looked like someone he could curl up and have hot chocolate with after a long day at work, someone who would be joyful when a guy walked in the door, happy to spend an evening at home with him just relaxing, doing nothing in particular.

That was just it—the sight of her evoked home to him, something he could never ascribe to the women he’d dated before, women who preferred nights out on the town on the arm of a successful professor. It didn’t escape him that, over the past few years, being a “nerd” had become an asset, one he’d not hesitated to take full advantage of, and there had been plenty of young women, even a few former students, who had been eager to date an up-and-coming scientist who’d begun, much to his

dismay, to attract media attention.

But June was part of a different world than the one he'd become accustomed to. For reasons he couldn't explain, she brought to mind everything he missed about living in a small town, being close to family and so much more. He'd spent a good portion of the last decade thinking only of his career, dedicating all of his time to furthering his research and, if he was honest, to impressing his department at the university.

June made him think of other things. Things he used to want but truly thought he didn't need any longer—things like home, and family, and someone to share it with. Someone to love.

None of which he would entertain, because that word—love—was no longer part of his vocabulary when it came to women.

Of course he loved his parents, his siblings and his nieces and nephews, but that was the safe kind of love. Loving a woman, which would inevitably lead to a broken heart again—well, that was an experience he'd rather not repeat. Especially not when his heart hadn't quite healed from the last.

What kind of scientist would he be if he didn't learn from failed experiments?

“Remind me again why we're doing this?” June asked as he opened the door and snow crashed through with the force of a speeding train.

He reached for her hand and, when she grabbed it with her own, pulled her close to his body, tucking an arm over her shoulders. He chose to ignore the way she stiffened as

their figures came together, not caring to assess whether it was aversion or pleasure at the contact that made her react in such a way.

“Because we’re starving, remember?”

“Oh, right,” she said. “Somehow the idea of having my face frozen off made me forget how hungry I am.”

He started to laugh but stopped when icy air hit his lungs, and set his focus on moving ahead instead. As they made their way in the direction of the bakery, Ethan was careful to keep his free hand against the wall of the building as the wind’s forceful blasts threatened to send them flying into the white abyss that used to be a parking lot. June’s head was down, her chin tucked into the top of her coat as he led the way. Despite the circumstances, Ethan couldn’t help but enjoy the way her tall, slim figure nestled against his own, her body’s warmth seeping through the layers of his clothing, strong enough to set off a flame in his lower abdomen.

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