



SUPER ROMANCE

The Moment of Truth

TARA TAYLOR QUINN

Tara Quinn

The Moment of Truth

«HarperCollins»

Quinn T. T.

The Moment of Truth / T. T. Quinn — «HarperCollins»,

Dana Harris's world has turned upside down. She's learned that her father isn't her father, and she has no idea who her real dad is. Then she receives the unexpected opportunity to attend Montford University in Shelter Valley, Arizona – a perfect time to start over. Especially when Josh Redmond adopts a puppy she's rescued. That's the beginning of an instant friendship between them, even though she senses that he's holding something back... Still, their friendship culminates in romance – and a night together. A night that has consequences. But at Christmas, a surprise revelation and a baby-to-be bring them both comfort. And joy!

© Quinn T. T.

© HarperCollins

The best things in life are those you don't expect...

Dana Harris's world has turned upside down. So when she receives the unexpected opportunity to attend Montford University in Shelter Valley, Arizona, she sees it as the perfect time to start over. Especially when Josh Redmond adopts a puppy she's rescued. That's the beginning of an instant friendship between them, even though she senses that he's holding something back.... Still, their friendship culminates in romance—and a night together. A night that has consequences.

But at Christmas, a surprise revelation and a baby-to-be bring them both comfort. And joy!

He was making her self-conscious

Josh liked knowing he had an effect on her. "You're a beautiful woman, Dana Harris." The words came from deep within him. Not the superficial place from which compliments for women usually sprang, but from someplace different.

"I'm just ordinary," she said, avoiding his gaze. Picking up the puppy, Dana set him on the kitchen counter and opened the tube of ointment. She started rubbing the cream into Little Guy's skin.

"You're kidding, right?" he said. "There's nothing ordinary about you."

"Don't, Josh." She frowned.

"Don't what?"

"Don't flatter me."

"You think I'm lying about how attractive I find you?"

She put the puppy back on the floor. "I know I'm nothing special in the looks department," she said.

From where he was standing, she sure was beautiful. Real. Curvy in the right places. With long hair he could get tangled up in, rather than hair that was perfectly styled to look like he could get tangled up in it.

He took her hand. "I'm not flattering you, Dana," he said softly. "I think you're incredible."

Dear Reader,

I'm so glad you're back in Shelter Valley with us. Over the years the town has grown and changed, and yet the important things, the love and fellowship, stay the same. When I first created this town I thought I was writing three books and moving on. We've got fifteen of them now. Together, we've made it more than just a fictional town....

And now we have *The Moment of Truth*. Will Shelter Valley be enough to sustain the interests of young newcomers? And wealthy socialites? Does the town have what it takes to stand the test of time?

And what about the mysterious scholarships? Where is this money coming from?

I hope you enjoy your visit here. And if you missed any of the previous titles, or just want to revisit them, they've all been released as ebooks, ready for you to download and begin reading in minutes. And some exciting news—Shelter Valley Stories are going to be available as audio books! Starting with *It's Never Too Late*, you can listen to them, if you'd prefer that.

As always, I love to hear from you! Please like me on Facebook, follow me on Twitter or email me at

staff@tarataylorquinn.com.

Happy reading!

Tara Taylor Quinn

The Moment of Truth

Tara Taylor Quinn



www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With sixty original novels, published in more than twenty languages, Tara Taylor Quinn is a USA TODAY bestselling author. She is a winner of the 2008 National Readers' Choice Award, four-time finalist for the RWA RITA® Award, a finalist for the Reviewers' Choice Award, the Booksellers' Best Award and the Holt Medallion, and she appears regularly on Amazon bestseller lists. Tara Taylor Quinn is a past president of the Romance Writers of America and served for eight years on its board of directors. She is in demand as a public speaker and has appeared on television and radio shows across the country, including CBS Sunday Morning. Tara is a spokesperson for the National Domestic Violence Hotline, and she and her husband, Tim, sponsor an annual in-line skating race in Phoenix to benefit the fight against domestic violence. When she's not at home in Arizona with Tim and their canine owners, Jerry Lee and Taylor Marie, or fulfilling speaking engagements, Tara spends her time traveling and in-line skating.

For my mother, Penny Gumser, my aunt Phyllis Pawloski, my sister-in-law, Kim Barney, and my husband, Tim Barney, who all understand that my fur babies are family, and love and care for them accordingly.

Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Excerpt](#)

CHAPTER ONE

“COME ON, JOSH, it’s only a few weeks before Thanksgiving, please stay until after the holiday....”

Joshua P. Redmond III, heir to a conglomeration of holdings that spanned the globe, replayed his mother’s words as he stood alone in the elevator of the Rose Garden Residential Resort, watching the floor lights blink their way upward.

Two, three, four.

“My presence is a detriment to Father’s firm, and a source of incredible pain to the Wellingtons.” His stilted response followed his mother’s plea in his replay of that morning’s breakfast table conversation.

“You are our son, Josh. Your father cares more about you than he does about the firm.”

Six, seven, eight.

“And you are more important to us than the Wellingtons, too, you know that.”

And if tradition provided for a small family gathering at the Redmond mansion, Josh might have stayed—to please his mother who’d done nothing but champion him since the day he was born.

Nine, ten, eleven.

But Thanksgiving at the Redmond estate had always been a highly coveted social affair among Boston’s elite. To uninvite the Wellingtons would be in poor taste. Beyond indecent.

It wasn’t anything that would have crossed his mind six months ago.

Twelve, thirteen, fourteen.

“I’m leaving this evening, Mom. It’s for the best.”

She’d nodded then, blinking away tears. He knew she’d given in because his going was for the best. And because she’d already pushed him as far as she could in getting him to agree to relocate to the godforsaken desert town of Shelter Valley.

As godforsaken as he was, he should fit right in there.

Seventeen.

A bell dinged gently, followed by the almost imperceptible glide to a stop that preceded the opening of the doors in front of him.

Plush beige carpet greeted him. Stepping out, he hardly noticed the cream-colored walls with maroon accents, or the expensive-looking paintings adorning them. Michelle Wellington’s suite, one of four on the floor, was to the right. He headed in that direction.

Who would ever have believed, two months ago, when they’d arrived in separate cars for their combined bachelor/bachelorette party, that the vivacious and sexy, gracious and gorgeous twenty-seven-year-old brunette would be reduced to living in a long-term care facility? An expensive and elegant one, to be sure, but still a home for those who couldn’t function on their own.

Michelle should have been lounging on a private beach on an island off the French coast, enjoying her honeymoon—their honeymoon.

“Hi, sweetie.” He announced himself the very same way every time he visited.

Her vacant gaze continued to stare forward.

Approaching the maroon velvet-upholstered chair, he held out the sprig of colorful wildflowers in his hand. Michelle loved natural arrangements, colorful arrangements, not hothouse or professionally raised blooms. Something he'd learned from her mother while they were both sitting in the hospital waiting room two months before.

Dressed in a silk blouse and linen pants, she showed no reaction to the flowers he'd placed in her direct line of vision. The ties holding her upright and in the chair were discreet—and all that he saw.

"I brought flowers," he said. He'd have brought chocolate, too, if she'd been able to taste it through the feeding tube that administered all of her nourishment these days.

No more decadence for Michelle Wellington.

No more sushi or expensive wine, shopping, traveling or any of the other things she'd loved.

And he, Joshua P. Redmond III, descendent not only of the Boston Redmonds, but also, on his mother's side, of the even more influential Boston Montfords, was largely to blame.

* * *

"HEY, LITTLE FELLA, where's your family?"

The soft, feminine voice floated through the balmy Arizona night, seemingly out of nowhere.

Stopping on the path behind the Montford University library, a shortcut to the parking lot where she'd left her car, twenty-five-year-old Dana Harris listened.

"It's okay, little guy," Dana heard the woman say. "I won't hurt you."

Dana hardly took a breath as she strained to pinpoint the direction the voice came from.

"Come on, it's okay. See? I won't hurt you. Where do you belong?"

The voice came from the right, and all she could see there was a huge desert plant of some kind. Still fairly new to campus, Dana didn't know what lay behind the large desert bush that stood well over her head. She didn't usually park where she'd parked that evening, didn't usually take this route to her car and had never studied at the library this late before.

"You're all right," the voice crooned. "We're a pair, aren't we? Both of us out alone in the dark and cold? Don't worry, little buddy, I'll take care of you."

Rounding the bush slowly, Dana caught sight of a small figure leaning against a cement wall that matched all the others that surrounded trash Dumpsters on campus, with what looked to be a ten-or fifteen-pound dog in her arms.

"Hey," she called out softly. "I don't want to startle you, but I couldn't help overhearing..."

The owner of the voice glanced up, and with the help of the security light shining behind the Dumpster, Dana recognized her.

"You're in my freshman English class," she said, in case the younger woman was nervous, being approached in the dark.

The other girl studied Dana for a second. "Yeah," she said after a moment. "I'm Lori Higley. And you're the woman who always sits in the front row."

"Right." Drawing the sides of her sweater around her, Dana moved closer. "What have you got there?"

"A dog, or rather a puppy, I think. I'm not sure what kind. But his paws are pretty big for his size so I'm thinking he's young and going to be big."

Reaching out, Dana stroked the dog's back. "It's okay, little fella," she said gently when she felt the animal quiver beneath her touch.

"He's scared," Lori said, adjusting the dog in her arms so Dana could get a better look at him.

"And hungry, too, I'd guess," Dana replied, scratching him lightly under the chin, near the throat. "His back is too bony."

"Do you think he's abandoned?"

"He has a collar."

"I couldn't read the tag."

Moving together, Dana and Lori approached the security light and Lori held the dog aloft as Dana studied the tag on his collar.

“He’s had his rabies shot, which means he’s probably at least three months old,” she said. “But there’s no name or ID other than the rabies registration number.”

The dog shivered, and shoved his nose against Dana’s hand. “We can call the vet in the morning and see if we can have this tag traced,” she said, lightly massaging the top of the dog’s head with her fingers. The more good feeling they could bestow on the little guy, the better chance that he’d relax.

She was also checking for mats or scabs or any other sign of disease or abuse.

“He was cowering in the corner over there by the Dumpster,” Lori said, rubbing the dog’s side as she held him. A bit huskier than Dana, Lori took the little guy’s weight with one arm.

“Probably looking for something to eat.”

“I’ve got tuna in my dorm...” Lori’s voice faded away, and Dana remembered overhearing the girl say something about being alone in the cold.

“I’ve got a kitchen full of food at home,” she said quickly. “Why don’t the two of you come with me and we’ll get a better look at this guy while he eats.”

“You live off campus?” Lori’s gaze matched the envious tone in her voice.

“I have a duplex about a mile from here. You can ride with me in my car if you’d like. That way you can hold him. And I’ll bring you back whenever you’re ready. Do you have a curfew?”

From what she’d heard, the dorms at Montford were still old-school—separated by gender and under pretty firm house rules. Dana started slowly walking toward her car.

“It’s not until midnight, and I’m in no hurry to go back.” Still cuddling the puppy, Lori fell into step beside Dana.

“Problems?”

“A roommate who was great until she met some guy that she can’t live without. We have a suite and right now he’s in the living room part of it with her and they’ll do it even if I’m there.”

“I thought the dorms were segregated.”

“They are.”

“So he’s not supposed to be in the room?”

“Right. But if I tell on them, I’ll have made a couple of enemies for life. They don’t care if I’m around so it’s not like I can act all put-out, like they’re keeping me from my room or anything. And I don’t want them to get kicked out of school.”

“Did you know her before you came to school?”

“Yeah. Forever. She’s my best friend. Or she was until she met him. She started drinking with him, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s doing drugs, too.”

“Montford’s not the place to start screwing around with that stuff.” Dana crossed behind the library and headed toward the parking lot in the distance. Her little used Mazda was the only vehicle there. “From what I’ve heard, they’ve got zero tolerance for substance abuse. You’re caught, you’re out.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t stop kids from partying. It goes on even here, trust me,” Lori said. “Kids are more cool about it, and keep it quieter, but college is college, you know? I just never expected Marissa to get into that scene. We were like the nerds in high school because we were the only two in our class who didn’t party. It’s one of the reasons we chose Montford.”

They’d reached Dana’s car. Unlocking the passenger door, she held it open while Lori, puppy in arms, slid inside.

“Where are you from?” she asked the pretty blonde beside her as she started the car.

Dana had always wanted blond hair—naturally blond—instead of the mousy brown she’d been born with. Her younger half sisters both had blond hair. At least she had their blue eyes.

“I’m from Bisbee. It’s a little town in southern Arizona. How about you?”

“I’m from Richmond, Indiana. It’s on the Ohio border.” She gave the dog a reassuring scratch and put the car in gear. “My folks own a small chain of furniture stores there.”

“Indiana is days away from here!” Lori said. “What brought you all the way across the country? You have relatives here?”

“Nope.” Dana shook her head, feeling a tug as her long ponytail caught between her back and the seat. “I’m here on scholarship.”

“What made you apply to Montford?”

It was just talk. A normal conversation between fellow students who’d just rescued a dog.

And it was excruciating as far as Dana was concerned—the explaining, answering to and thinking about her past. Shelter Valley represented a new start for her. A life where she could just be Dana Harris, a person who wasn’t second-best, who didn’t wear Cinderella clothes and live a Cinderella life. A woman who’d accepted a scholarship she hadn’t applied for, to embark on a life she hadn’t planned on, because she hadn’t been able to bear the thought of doing as her father had demanded and marry a man she didn’t love.

But then, Daniel Harris, for whom she’d been named, the man she’d always called “Dad” and thought was her biological father, wasn’t really her father. And no matter how far away she roamed, or how hard she tried to be good enough, that fact was never going to change.

CHAPTER TWO

“YOUR MOM AND DAD are well and send their love.” Sitting in the chair opposite Michelle, a chair identical to hers except for the restraints, Josh looked from the still-beautiful woman to the day’s fresh flowers in the vase on the coffee table directly in front of them. He’d replaced yesterday’s bouquet. Opened the sheers that had been pulled for the night across the window opposite them, giving Michelle a skyline view of the harbor she loved.

He’d turned on the sixty-inch flat-screen television hanging on the wall next to the window. And, when she’d frowned, turned it back off again, although he knew her frown probably had nothing to do with the TV.

Michelle comprehended little, if any, of what went on around her. According to her doctors, frowning—and smiling, too—were simple reflexes that came and went. Sometimes her eyes filled with tears—a physiological reaction to medication, dry eyes or something in the air. Her gaze would land on something sometimes, but there was no connection between visual stimulation and a thought process that would translate the view. Permanent vegetative state was the diagnosis—and it was the same according to all four specialists Josh and her family had called in from around the world to see to her. She couldn’t move of her own volition. Or speak. Or even think.

But somehow she breathed on her own. And as long as that was the case, Josh’s inheritance would be providing for her care. Every dime of it. From a trust account he’d established in her name.

Her parents had more than enough wealth to care for her. Insurance covered basic expenses. But as far as Josh was concerned, his money would be dirty if he spent it on himself.

“I’m going away, Michelle.” He said what he’d come to say. “I’m on my way out of town now.” He’d waited until nightfall so there’d be less traffic.

It seemed fitting that he’d slink away into the night.

Leaning forward, he grabbed a tissue from the box beside her and wiped a drop of drool from the side of her mouth, catching it before it could roll down her chin. “I don’t know when I’ll be back,” he told her. It wasn’t right, him leaving her like this. But staying wasn’t right, either. His presence in town was hurting his father’s business, creating strife for the Wellingtons and embarrassing his mother’s family, the Montfords. The Montfords had worked hard to rebuild their reputation of decorum after his distant uncle’s scandalous marriage and desertion many decades before. They’d dedicated all the decades since to reestablishing themselves as a family of conservative do-gooders, whose purpose on earth was to contribute to and better the world and whose behavior was always above reproach.

Josh's behavior, his selfishness and lack of awareness, had caused a scandal.

So he'd had to choose between further hurting Michelle, who, by all accounts had no idea he was even sitting there speaking with her, and hurting all of the people who loved him, who'd supported him and given him everything he had. People whom he'd taken completely for granted. People who still had work to do and much to contribute, to better the world in which they lived.

The choice had been a no-win. Hell. Just like the life his years of cavalier unawareness had created for him.

"It's taken the Montfords three generations to gain back the respect my great-great-uncle lost," he told Michelle, something he never would have mentioned to her in the past. Truth be told, he couldn't remember ever having a meaningful conversation with her, period.

Even his marriage proposal had been made on the fly. They'd been skydiving that day. He'd been filled with the adrenaline of having conquered the air—coupled with his newly resolved determination that it was time for him to marry. His marriage would be good for the family name. Good for business.

And because, in all of his travels across the United States and abroad, he'd never found that one woman who stood out above the rest, he'd chosen the most beautiful one he knew.

One he'd dated on and off for years.

"Let's get married," he'd blurted over a glass of celebratory champagne in the back of the family limo on the way home from the airfield.

He would have driven his Mercedes convertible but hadn't wanted to stay sober after the great event....

The sky outside Michelle's window was a purplish hue, aglow from the lights of the harbor. Earlier that day, when he'd left his mother's house, that sky had been a vivid blue. As blue as it had been the day, two years before when, without hesitation, Michelle had accepted his proposal. And thrown her arms around him, confessing her undying love for him.

He'd had no idea she'd cared so much. Then, or after.

He was one of the blessed ones. The privileged. He was too busy to care....

Busy upholding his reputation, keeping up appearances, studying and, later, working even harder than his ancestors had in order to ensure the continuation of the family name and financial success. And when his work was done, he'd been busy partying.

"My great-uncle a few times removed, Sam Montford, married a black woman and brought her to live in the family mansion downtown," he told Michelle. Back then, the scandal had nearly ruined the Montfords. It was old history now, something people knew but didn't talk about much anymore.

"And if that wasn't bad enough," he continued softly, "he fathered a child with her who was to be raised among the privileged society kids, equal to them."

Michelle's expressionless face gave proof to the seriousness of her condition. If she'd had any mental cognition at all, she'd have shuddered at that one. Not because of the child's mixed race, but because of the societal scandal such an act would have caused back in his great-great-uncle's day.

People of his family's social class absolutely did not cause scandal. At any cost. To the Montfords and Wellingtons, Redmonds and people like them, appearances and reputations were every bit as valuable as their financial net worth. Sometimes more so.

In today's world, his distant uncle's actions might have produced a raised eyebrow in their conservative society, but generations ago, mixed marriages, particularly among the elite, were unheard of. Blasphemous.

Michelle offered him a steady stream of drool.

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" he asked, wiping her chin and slowly running one finger down Michelle's linen-clad knee.

Her therapist had already been there that day, and would be in again before bedtime, to massage every muscle in her body and move her limbs, to keep her as toned as they could for as long as they could.

Because he'd deemed it so. He wanted her to be as comfortable as she could be.

And the irony was not lost on him. If he'd paid even a hundredth of the attention to Michelle then that he did now, none of this would have happened. It was an inarguable fact—and the reason Josh took full blame for the probable attempted suicide that had left Michelle in her current state.

What kind of fool left his deliriously drunk fiancée alone to sleep it off while he went back to party some more? True, he hadn't known that Michelle had consumed enough liquor to make alcohol poisoning a risk. He hadn't even paid enough attention to know she had a low tolerance for alcohol. He knew she drank with the rest of them; he hadn't bothered to notice how much. Or, in her case, how little. As her future husband, he should have noticed. And if he'd stayed with her that night, tended to her, paid even a little bit of attention to the symptoms of alcohol poisoning that she'd already been exhibiting, he could probably have saved her.

"Remember that New Year's party we went to at the Montford mansion the year I turned twenty-one?"

He'd been there with a blonde whose name he couldn't remember—someone he'd brought home from Harvard to show his father he was his own man. Another woman he'd treated kindly but had callously used for his own end. Michelle had had a date, too—a pompous ass a few years older than them who'd looked down his nose at all the alumni from their elite high school. Forty-eight of the fifty kids he'd graduated with had been there. And many from Michelle's class, two years behind his, had attended, as well.

"A bunch of us got drunk and my date threw up on the porch steps," Josh continued, sparing himself nothing—telling her something she already knew. "Thank goodness it was the back porch steps and Bart liked us enough to get it cleaned up before anyone found out."

Bart—his maternal grandfather's live-in help. A man who'd run the Montford city estate since before Josh had been born.

Josh had escaped besmirching the Montford name that time. But he hadn't learned his lesson.

Michelle's head tipped forward, and with his fingers around her chin as he'd been shown, Josh righted her. And rubbed her cheek.

On some level, he told himself, she had to know that he was there. That she was surrounded by tenderness. By anything and everything money could provide.

She had to know that the only thing she'd wanted—his attention—was hers.

"One day when Sam Montford was away from the mansion on business, his wife and baby went out and found a lynch mob waiting for them on the front steps outside their home," he said, looking out in the distance, to the harbor seventeen stories down and about a mile over from them. Unlike his shame of ten years ago, that long-ago event had taken place on the front porch—not the back.

"The mob killed them both," he said evenly, hardly feeling anything at all. Just like Michelle. They were alike in that way. Dead to any kind of real living. "Hard to picture Boston's elite in any kind of a mob, isn't it?" he said. "But things were more primitive then. People took matters into their own hands. And didn't stand calmly by when others tried to change the rules by which they lived."

Michelle's gaze was turned on him and his breath caught in his throat. Until he remembered that he'd repositioned her head.

"But to kill a woman and an innocent baby..."

If only Michelle would recover, even a little bit, if he could talk to her, find out what she'd been thinking the night she'd nearly drunk herself to death, to know for sure that he'd been the reason she'd consumed such a dangerous level of alcohol the night of their prewedding party.

He hadn't loved her. Her heart was breaking.

And he'd been too self-absorbed to notice that anything was wrong.

Alcohol poisoning, loss of oxygen and a careless fiancé had all contributed to Michelle's predicament. He'd been the only one who could have saved her.

"When his wife and baby were killed, Sam Montford left town," he blurted. "He took up residence with an Indian tribe out west. And later, after marrying the daughter of a missionary he met on the reservation, he founded a little town in the middle of the Arizona desert."

It had just been in the past couple of years that his mother had developed an interest in genealogy, helped along by the readily available resources on the internet. That research infused her with the need to get to know her distant relatives—relatives she'd heard about but never met. Being able to look them up, learn details of their lives, made them seem real to her, although she hadn't contacted any of them yet. The two branches of the family had not been in touch since old Sam Montford left Boston. After his sojourn with the Indians, he'd founded Shelter Valley. But he'd never reconnected with the Boston part of his family.

While researching her family tree, Josh's mom had discovered the names of cousins several times removed, as well as birth dates, marriages and deaths. The need to meet them intensified.

And because Josh had agreed to make his home there, she'd finally given her blessing to his plan to move away—at least for a while—rather than travel for an extended period until the news of Michelle's tragedy and his subsequent broken engagement died down a bit. "It's a town that welcomes losers," he added.

Not quite what his mother had said. She had framed it as a town that would welcome him.

Because she thought he was going to arrive in town a Montford. Or even a Redmond. She thought he'd been in touch with the newfound—and long-estranged—branch of her family. He'd never told her so. It was just what she'd have done—and expected him to do.

He wasn't moving to Shelter Valley as a Montford.

He was going as Josh. To accept the junior-level position his Harvard business degree had qualified him to have in the university's business operations office.

"That's where I'm going, sweetie," he said. "Out to Shelter Valley, Arizona."

He wiped away more saliva. And could hardly remember what it had felt like to kiss her lips. Wished they stood out from all of the other lips he'd kissed.

Or even that he could remember the last time he'd kissed her.

"We didn't get to the altar, to exchange our vows." He bowed his head. "But I'm promising something to you now. I will change my ways, become more aware of those around me and do what I can to make this world a better place."

He wasn't actually sure if Michelle was into the whole bettering the world thing as much as the Montfords were. They'd never really gotten around to talking about it. Still, she'd been involved in charity work. He wasn't sure how much. But during their two-year engagement, he'd accompanied her to several black-tie affairs for different causes.

He'd written generous checks.

And spent most of the evenings making business contacts. Or doing other things like planning the mountain-climbing expedition he and several of his friends had taken over Christmas the previous year.

"I've got a few thousand dollars with me to get started," he told her. "I sold the Mercedes. And the 4x4. I bought a used SUV with a hitch and loaded a trailer with stuff, and that's all I'm taking. The rest of the stuff I sold with the condo, and that money went into your trust, too. My monthly stipend will also go into the trust. It's there for as long as you need it.

"My mother's agreed, for the time being, not to get involved," he said, thinking of the days ahead. "I told her I'd handle the first contact with the Arizona Montfords on my own—or I wouldn't go. If she interferes with my life while I'm there, I'll just move on. The point is for me to get away from here. It doesn't matter where. She's the one who wants me in Shelter Valley, and this is the only way I'll do it." There wasn't going to be any big family reunion in the near future.

What his mother didn't know was that his "visit" with the Montfords was going to be short and sweet. He wasn't one of them.

He was starting a new life. Not going on vacation. He was going to live like a regular guy. One who had to work and sweat and save. One who was humbled enough to pay attention to the people around him. He couldn't do that if his old life followed him. Making things easy for him.

"Sweetie? Michelle? Is there anything I can do, or say, anything that..."

His voice broke. Looking down, Josh breathed and waited for the emotion to pass. It always did. One of the many things he'd learned over the past couple of months.

He hadn't meant anyone any harm. Hadn't meant to ignore the needs of those around him. He just hadn't noticed.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Redmond, I didn't realize you were here. I'll come back later...."

Sara, one of the three full-time caregivers he employed to see that Michelle had everything she could possibly need, stepped back through the archway leading to Michelle's bedroom.

"No, it's okay, Sara," he said, standing. "You can come in. I was just leaving."

"I hear you're leaving town, that you won't be coming by here anymore," the middle-aged widow said. He knew Sara best. She lived in the suite with Michelle.

"That's right." She could castigate him for his callousness. All Michelle had left was his visits. Her parents couldn't bear to come. Couldn't bear to see her this way.

And her sisters, all their friends...they considered Michelle dead and buried.

But Michelle didn't need him there as much as the rest of them, her family included, needed him gone.

"It's about time," Sara said, smiling at him with a warmth he wasn't used to seeing. People in his world banked their emotions, their expressions, showing the world a blankness that preserved their ability to walk in and out of rooms, do the business they'd come to do, without drama.

Or shame.

Without anyone getting one up on them—or being able to manipulate them.

Their walls protected their reputations.

And they protected the money.

The gray-haired woman moved quietly to Michelle's side, running her fingers tenderly through the young woman's hair. "We'll be just fine without you," she said. "Missy here has no idea you're killing yourself over something you didn't do. She ordered those drinks and she drank them. You wasn't even in the same room as her. And she gets no benefit from these visits. But you...you've got a whole life to live. Things to do and people to help. It's time for you to let go."

Let go?

Michelle had taken that last irrevocable step—she'd drunk herself into a stupor, but she'd done so because of his negligence.

And she'd been without oxygen for so long because he'd left her alone in a nearly comatose state. If he'd been committed enough, devoted enough, even aware enough to stay with her, they'd be on their honeymoon now.

Let go? Never.

No matter what Sara said, Michelle had lost her life because of him. It was a fact that couldn't be denied. Or changed. And her family had made that plain to him.

His friends, too, had blamed him, even as they commiserated with him. He'd have to live with the aftermath of guilt, and the whispers that condemned him for having left her alone that night.

But Sara was right about one thing. He had to get out into the world. To live among those he'd spent his entire life ignoring.

To find something human in the selfish bastard he'd become.

CHAPTER THREE

DANA AND LORI fed the dog.

“We should name him,” Lori said as they watched him gulp down a bowl of instant rice with canned chicken mixed in.

“Uh-uh.” Dana shook her head. “You name him, you take on ownership—and he’s not ours.”

She couldn’t keep him. He wasn’t house-trained, as they’d already discovered. And as he grew he was going to need more space than her little duplex would give him.

They bathed him. And fed him again.

Or attempted to. As soon as Dana put down the second bowl of chicken she’d boiled for the puppy, Kitty Kari darted out from behind the refrigerator and over to the bowl.

“You have a kitten! How cute.” Lori grinned, watching the tiny calico put her front paws on the bowl and dip her head inside until she reached her goal.

The puppy, easily five times her size, cowered back and watched as the kitten ate his food. And Dana felt a kinship with him.

“Kari, that’s not yours,” she said, reaching over and plucking the cat out of the bowl. “Little Guy’s a lot hungrier than you are,” she explained.

“Did you bring her with you from Indiana?” Lori asked, reaching over to pet the kitten.

Shaking her head, Dana watched the puppy, hoping he’d head back to the bowl on his own. It was best if siblings could find a way to coexist.

Not that he was, or would be, a member of their family. Still, while he was in their home...

“She was left on the side of the road in Missouri. I’d stopped for the night on my trip out here and saw the box on the entrance ramp to the freeway. There were three kittens inside, but only Kari survived.” Holding the cat up to her face she said, “And you’re doing just fine, aren’t you, girl? Healthy and sassy as can be.”

Kneeling, Lori coaxed the puppy slowly to the bowl and told Dana that she’d never had a pet, which led to a conversation about the younger woman’s life in Bisbee living alone with her miner father after her mother died.

Dana had no idea who her real father was. But she didn’t offer up that information.

Over a glass of iced tea, while they sat on her back patio waiting for the little guy to do his business, Dana offered the younger woman her spare bedroom for the night. And any night that her roommate had her boyfriend over. Marissa couldn’t get away with sneaking a boy into an all-girls’ dorm too often. And Dana understood Lori’s predicament. Sometimes you had to choose to look the other way for the greater good.

* * *

TWO DAYS AND TWELVE HOURS later, on Friday morning, Dana was almost late for her freshman English class because she’d had to clean up two puppy messes left by Little Guy in the fifteen minutes between taking him outside first thing in the morning and getting out of the shower. Lori, who’d caught a ride with her back to campus in time for their English class on Wednesday hadn’t been over since, but had offered to babysit the dog over the weekend.

Dana was hoping she wouldn’t need her. After class on Friday, she headed straight home to the bathroom where she’d been locking up the puppy while she was away, groaned at the toilet-paper-strewn floor, scooped up the unrepentant offender, and the jarred sample she’d collected from the backyard that morning. Leaving the mess, she headed back out the door.

Cassie Tate Montford, owner of the Shelter Valley animal clinic, was waiting for them and she didn’t want to be late.

Zack Foster, the only other veterinarian on Cassie’s staff, had taken care of the kittens for her when she’d arrived in town, and she’d called him first thing Wednesday morning only to find that he was out of town. The clinic’s receptionist had assured Dana that Dr. Tate would handle their situation.

Driving with Little Guy wasn’t easy. Luckily, she didn’t have far to go and arrived at the clinic five minutes ahead of her one-thirty appointment. And five minutes after that, Dr. Tate entered the examination room.

The middle-aged redhead wore her long hair piled into a twist. With her white coat and efficient air, she was a bit intimidating, until her brown eyes landed on the creature in Dana's arms.

"Hello, friend, what can you tell us about yourself?"

The gentleness with which the older woman handled the stray, the way she treated him like a person, instead of a lesser being, endeared her to Dana.

"He looks to be in perfect health," the doctor said after a thorough examination. "I'm guessing he's somewhere between four and six months old. Temp is normal, heart sounds good. Gums are healthy. Teeth, too. No fleas or skin infestations, no signs of internal parasites or worms in the sample you brought in. His eyes and ears are clear. His coat's healthy. He's certainly got a good disposition."

Dana could vouch for that. Standing at the table, opposite the doctor, Dana asked, "What breed do you think he is?"

"He's got some Lab in him. And, I think, poodle." Dr. Tate smiled. "Do you have any interest in keeping him?"

"I can hang on to him for a little while. But I live in a duplex. And he's going to get big, isn't he?" Please tell me I'm wrong, that his big paws are just a fluke.

"I'd guess at least fifty pounds. Maybe more."

"He's got a rabies tag," Dana pointed out.

"I know," Cassie Tate Montford said. "We're checking on that now, but since no one's called looking for him, my guess is he's been abandoned."

He was too sweet to have been abandoned. Someone loved him. Was worried about him. Probably putting up lost-dog signs all over the neighborhood. She hadn't seen any, when she'd driven around town looking for them after class on Thursday. But she probably just hadn't landed on the right neighborhood. "I have a kitty..."

"Right. Kari. I read Zack's notes on her. And a hamster, too, I saw."

"Some kids in my freshman biology class were talking about having gotten him for their dorm and then found out they couldn't keep him."

"Freshman biology?" the doctor asked. Petting the dog, she said, "If you're in school full-time, and working, it might be hard to take care of a new puppy."

"I don't work," she blurted. "I'm here on a full scholarship, including living expenses. And I've been working in my family's furniture business back home for the past six years. I've got savings...."

When she realized she was babbling, she shut up.

Curiosity flashed across the doctor's expression. "Your scholarship includes living expenses?" The veterinarian sounded surprised by that fact.

"Yes." So? Little Guy was getting restless, and Dana lightly scratched his chest in between his two front paws. It was his favorite spot—as she'd discovered during the middle of the night when she couldn't get him to stop whining in the bathroom and go to sleep. He'd done just fine in her bed.

"Did you apply for the scholarship?"

"No." She frowned. "Why?"

"It's just that...I know someone else...the fiancé of a friend of a friend." Cassie Tate Montford chuckled. "He's also here this semester on a scholarship with full living expenses included, and those kinds of scholarships are few and far between. He didn't apply for his, either, and he has no idea where the scholarship came from. He's convinced his grandmother set it up, but if you got one, too, that's probably not likely. Unless you know him. Mark Heber?"

"I've never heard of him. Is he from Indiana?"

"No. It's probably just some kind of national program set up by a private benefactor. Private meaning whoever donates the money wants to remain anonymous. I've just...no one here has ever heard of this before and now we have multiple recipients in one semester."

"Yeah." She shrugged. Dana didn't really care how the scholarship had come to be—only that it was. "I'm pretty sure my mother applied for it on my behalf," she offered because of the tenderness

the older woman was showing to Little Guy. “Anyway, I’m fine, financially, as long as I watch my spending. I can certainly afford dog food and vet bills until we find a home for him.”

“We have a pet placement program here at the clinic. If you were to keep him, it probably won’t be long before—”

“I, actually...wanted to talk to you about that,” Dana said. Zack had mentioned the pet placement program when she’d brought the kittens in to be seen. And again after she’d joined his and his wife’s pet-therapy program at school. “Dr. Foster mentioned that you needed someone to temporarily house unwanted pets. Also people who’d be willing to travel to new adoptive homes to make sure the new owners weren’t overwhelmed and to check on the general well-being of the pet.”

The doctor smiled. “That’s right. We’re looking for another pet placement counselor. But the job is volunteer only. I’m assuming Zack explained that there aren’t any funds to pay you. Are you interested?”

“Yes,” Dana said without hesitation.

“Great, since Zack already offered you the position, I don’t need any other reference. I’ll have our receptionist, Hope, sign you up.” Dr. Tate grinned and added, “We have a pet-therapy program, too. It’s part of a club through the university. Zack and his wife head it up. I’m guessing he mentioned it to you?”

“He did,” Dana said. “I’m already a member.”

The doctor nodded. “In the meantime, let’s wait until we hear back about the rabies tag and go from there. If you’d like to see Hope about the counselor position while you’re waiting, we’ll be all set.”

Dana was settled in a chair in the waiting room, a packet filled with pet counselor information on her lap. She was watching a rerun of a dog whisperer show on the flat-screen television on the wall, when the door to the clinic opened.

Little Guy jumped down from her lap and darted the full extent of his leash to jump up on the man who was taking off his sunglasses as he walked toward the reception desk. Dana yanked on the puppy’s leash just as the stranger stepped back, right onto Little Guy’s foot. The puppy squealed and peed on what looked to be a very expensive leather shoe.

Before she had time to react, the inner door opened and Dr. Tate Montford emerged.

“Ms. Harris? We just heard... Oh!” The doctor noticed the stranger. “I’m sorry, I didn’t hear the bell and Hope’s out back. Can we help you?”

By the time her eyes dropped to the man’s shoe, Dana had grabbed a wad of paper towel from the dispenser on the wall and, with the little guy’s leash tightly held in one hand, was cleaning up the man’s expensive leather with the other.

“I can take care of that,” the man said, his voice friendly as he bent down to her level.

She held on to the towel. “I should have watched him better. I’m so sorry.” Dana looked up from the shoe and into the most soulful pair of blue eyes she’d ever seen, just inches from her own.

“It’s fine,” the man said, the warmth of his fingers transferring to hers as he took the towel from her and finished cleaning the toe of his shoe. “It’s just a pair of shoes. I have more.”

Staring, she couldn’t think of a thing to say, so she stood up. And hoped someone would do something to break the awkward moment.

“I’m Josh Redmond,” the stranger said to Dr. Tate, upright again. “I’m new to town, working at the university, and was hoping to have a word with you, when you’re free.”

“I’ve got half an hour for a late lunch, if you can wait for about five minutes,” the doctor said easily enough.

Stupidly, Dana experienced a pang of envy. The man was gorgeous, but she didn’t give much credence to looks. It was his eyes that got to her. They had a depth to them, as if they were searching. As if he’d lost something.

She was a sucker for strays.

Kitty Kari and Billy the hamster were it for her. Their small duplex had reached its capacity.

"I'm sorry." The doctor turned to Dana as Josh Redmond took a seat. "I was just coming out to tell you that we traced the tag to an address out on the reservation. Sheriff Richards knew the place. It's been boarded up for about a week. The family left no forwarding address."

So Little Guy had been abandoned.

"You want to keep him until we find a home?" Dr. Tate asked Dana. "I'd take him myself but our collie is getting up there in years and her health is failing. I'm afraid of what an energetic puppy would do to her at this point."

Little Guy looked up at Dana. She'd have to buy a dog bowl. And puppy pads. A kennel to keep him in while she was attending class. But she'd need those things on hand, anyway, as the newest pet placement counselor of the Love To Go Around Program.

"I'll give him a home." Josh Redmond stood up. "If you don't already have a permanent home in mind for him, that is. I'm new to town. I...live alone. And would like the company."

Dana knew what it felt like to be alone.

"I'll fill out whatever paperwork you need," Josh said, his gaze moving between Dana and the vet. The earnestness in his voice caught at her emotions even more than the look in his eyes. He seemed to feel he had to convince them.

Dana recognized that note in his voice, almost as if he was trying to convince himself that he was good enough....

"I can do the home checks, if you like," she offered.

And maybe she'd get a puppy for herself, too. One that was smaller and could live happily in a duplex.

Dr. Tate explained to Josh Redmond about the pet adoption program requirements. Adding that Dana would perform periodic home checks for the first month or so, and asking if that was all right with him.

"Absolutely," the man said. He wasn't smiling, but he seemed eager enough to take the puppy home with him.

Dana handed over the leash and, counselor packet hugged to her chest, ignored the sting of tears as she turned to go and leave Little Guy behind.

She'd best get better at turning the unwanted pets over to new families if she was going to be any good to the Love To Go Around program. And really, how selfish of her to think that she deserved all the stray love.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" the man's voice sounded behind her.

"I already paid my bill," she assured him, needing to get outside, to take a breath of fresh air. She'd be fine in a second.

"How are you going to visit him if you don't know where he lives?" Josh Redmond asked.

Oh, right. Turning back, she waited patiently while the man wrote his address on a pad of paper Dr. Tate handed to him. She gave him her cell number, as well, in case he had any problems with the puppy. And she bent to kiss Little Guy goodbye.

"This address is only temporary," he said as he handed her the piece of paper. "Until I can find something more permanent."

Dana's smile, while still shaky, wasn't forced the second time she turned to go. She'd see Little Guy again. Very soon.

CHAPTER FOUR

"ARE YOU SURE I can't get you something to eat?" Sitting outside at a picnic table in the little courtyard behind the clinic, Cassandra Montford was absolutely nothing like Josh had expected.

On the bench across from her, his knees beneath the cement tabletop avoiding hers, Josh shook his head. He'd chosen Cassie deliberately because she was one step away from blood relation. One step away from someone who would be directly affected by what he had to say.

“We’ve always got fresh veggies and sandwich fixings in the fridge,” Cassie said. “For days like today when there isn’t time for a proper meal.”

“You always this busy, then?”

“Sometimes.” The beautiful redhead took a bite of a sandwich and shrugged. “My partner, Zack, is out of town with his wife this week so things are a little more crazy than usual around here.”

His mind reeling with the knowledge that he had a four-legged creature waiting for him in a kennel inside that back door, Josh said, “I won’t keep you long.”

“What can I do for you?” Cassie asked.

She took a sip from a water bottle and offered him a bottle of his own. He declined that, too.

“I have a favor to ask,” he said, suddenly conscious of the fact that the pretty veterinarian had limited time to offer him and was already halfway through her sandwich. “Of sorts,” he amended.

He’d told himself he wasn’t going to ask anything of anyone.

And he wasn’t.

Not of material value, anyway.

“You said your place is only temporary. You’re new to town?” The doctor’s expression was serious.

“Yes.”

“Here to stay?”

“For now.”

Cassie Montford swallowed her last bite of sandwich and wrapped her hands around the plastic bottle, looking at him expectantly.

“I’m Josh Redmond.”

“I know. You said so. Should that mean something to me?”

“I’d hoped not, but I wasn’t sure. My mother promised me she’d stay out of things, but I wasn’t positive she had. It was also possible someone from here had done the same research she did.” Which had been another reason he’d waited to do this in person. He was hoping for anonymity and he wouldn’t have had any chance of success at all if his identity preceded him.

Frowning, Cassie’s gaze remained open. “Do I know your mother?”

“No! And I’m making more out of this than I should. I need to tell you who I am and why I’m in town, but before I do, I’d like to ask you to keep what I’m about to tell you to yourself.”

“I can’t promise that. In the first place, I’m not in the habit of keeping secrets from my husband.”

“Sam, Jr.”

“You know Sam? Were you in the peace corps with him?”

“No.” But he was surprised to hear that Cassie’s husband, Sam, had been. A stint in the peace corps wasn’t typically something you found on the résumés of the sons of the elite.

Curious.

“I’m sorry, I just thought...” Cassie broke off. “Other than Sam’s time in the peace corps, we pretty much know all of the same people. We’ve been friends since kindergarten.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to keep anything from your husband,” Josh jumped in. “Though I’d hope that he’d keep anything you tell him to himself.”

“I still can’t give you any assurances that either one of us will keep your secret until I know the nature of it.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “I wouldn’t have bothered you at all except that I need you to send a letter to my mother, assuring her that I’ve arrived and am being properly looked after.”

She hadn’t asked him to do so. But he knew her. She’d manage to keep her word to stay out of things longer if she had some sort of contact, was involved in some little way.

The other woman’s frown deepened. As did the look of compassion in her eyes.

“Are you ill?” Cassie asked.

“No. I’m in perfect health.” As fate would have it. Michelle was the one who’d paid for his years of selfish indifference. “And I have absolutely no intention of being looked after.” He had to make that quite clear. Whether the Montfords agreed to keep his secret or not was not going to change his plan. It just might change his location.

“Okay, tell me who you are, and I’ll tell you what I’m willing to do for you.”

“I’m your cousin,” Josh said. “Or rather, your husband’s cousin. Twice removed, but not so much when it comes to the family fortunes. As near as my mother could tell, Sam and I are currently the only direct heirs, once our parents pass.”

Cassie’s mouth dropped open. “You’re a Montford,” she said, as though she’d expected him to show up some day.

“My mother is the sole descendent of the Boston Montfords. Your husband’s father is the sole descendent of the Arizona Montfords.”

“It’s my understanding that the Boston Montfords disowned our Sam and that the two branches of the family haven’t been in touch in all the generations since.”

Josh’s mother was an only child. Josh was an only child. The Boston Montfords just might die out.

“I know,” he said. “But my mother, as the only heir to the Boston half of the fortune, intends to change that.”

“And she’s using you to do so.”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“So what’s in it for you?”

Josh bowed his head.

Cassie Montford, who, according to his mother, had been born and raised in Shelter Valley, had obviously learned a thing or two about the outside world, as well.

He sized up the woman across from him. Like he’d study a client across the boardroom table. To see how far he could push, how much he could get.

He saw a spot of moisture on her lip.

A spot of moisture that, in that second, reminded him of Michelle.

“Peace,” he finally answered. “And it’s not something you or anyone else can give me,” he said, knowing that his life in Shelter Valley depended on his honesty in this moment, because it depended on her full cooperation.

“I don’t understand.”

“Like Sam’s great-grandfather, I’m in Shelter Valley to start a new life,” Josh said, looking her straight in the eye. “Also like him, I am choosing to do so without benefit of the family fortune.”

“Choosing to do so.”

“Yes.”

“So you aren’t on the run? Or cut off for heinous deeds?” She might have been joking, if not for the dead seriousness of her gaze.

“No. On the contrary. I’m in Shelter Valley because the only way my mother would be at peace with me leaving Boston was to know that I was coming here. My parents think that I’m living off my monthly inheritance draw.”

“And that’s why you want me to write to her and let her know that you’re here and being cared for, for her peace of mind?”

“Right.”

“What kind of care do you need, Mr. Redmond?”

“Call me Josh...please. And the only thing I need from you and Sam—other than this one communication with my mother who is, by the way, a wonderful lady who will want to meet you someday—is my space and a promise that you will not say anything to anyone, including family, about who I really am.”

“Let me guess, you want your mother to believe you’re here as a Montford, but you want no part of the family name and all that goes with it.”

“Pretty much. My mother has promised to stay out of my life for a while at least. She agreed not to pursue a relationship with your side of the family until I could get established on my own.”

It was the only way he’d agree to live in Shelter Valley. And maybe it was harsh, but he was only asking her not to get to know people she’d never met.

Cassie nodded. Obviously assessing him.

“You don’t seem surprised by any of this.”

“I’m not. Seems to run in the family.”

Josh remembered her peace corps comment. “From what my mother was able to find out from her searches, your husband, and his father before him, have been upstanding Montford heirs, honoring the family name.”

“She must not have looked far enough,” Cassie said with a not quite humorous, half grin. “My Sam was more like the man he was named after,” she said. “He left town when we were barely out of our teens. He’s only been back in Shelter Valley, living as a Montford, for the past twelve years. His father, James, had some health issues several years back. We thought we’d lost him, but he surprised us all.”

For the first time, Josh was actually curious about the family he’d come to town to avoid.

But getting to know his distant relatives was not part of his plan.

Neither was a dog.

But he was there to help others. And the little pisser needed a home.

Sam and Cassie Montford didn’t need him.

Leaning forward, he put his arms on the table. “I applied for...was offered...and accepted a job in the Montford University Business Affairs department.” He told her what he needed her to know. “Acquired only on the basis of my business degree from Harvard, not because of any other connection. Being out on my own...living without the benefit of name or fortune...is something I have to do for myself. To keep my mother off my back, I would like to do it here, in Shelter Valley. But I can’t do that without your cooperation. If anyone here finds out who I am, I won’t be able to become simply a citizen. From what I’ve gathered in the short time I’ve been in town, the name Montford carries weight around here. If I’m going to find some self-respect, I have to live off my own efforts, not the benefits that come with my background.”

“Sounds like you have something to prove.”

“I need anonymity,” he said. “If I can’t find that here, I’ll move on.”

Lips pursed, Cassie studied him for a long moment and then took a deep breath. “I have to tell Sam....”

“Understood.”

“And get his cooperation.”

Josh nodded.

“As long as my husband doesn’t foresee any trouble, I have no problem granting your request.”

“Thank you.” Josh stood, relieved. “For the time being, I’m renting a vacant house on the west side of town,” he told her. “I plan to buy something as soon as I get an idea of where I’d like to settle.”

Cassie mentioned some acreage with mountain views and Josh shook his head. “I meant it when I said I’m on my own,” he told her. “Any Montford monies I had, or will have in the future, are going in a trust designated for another use.”

He didn’t elaborate.

“The only house I can buy has to fall within mortgage qualification requirements commensurate with my new salary.”

Cassie Montford gathered up the remnants from her lunch and walked with him toward the back door of the clinic. “You’re really serious about this.”

“Completely.”

She reached for the door and stopped with her hand on the knob. “Can I ask why?”

He’d been prepared for the question. Not for the empathy he read in her eyes.

“I was born into a life of privilege, which, as it turns out, I didn’t deserve. And I’m terrified of dying with nothing but a wasted life to show for having been here.”

She wanted to ask more. He could see the questions in her eyes.

“I think my husband’s going to want to meet you.”

Not if Josh could avoid it. He couldn’t afford to let himself get that close to the life he was leaving behind. Not if he was going to make this work.

Because, like an alcoholic tempting himself with a drink, Josh was scared of what the smell and feel and taste of privilege would do to him after a week or two without it.

His resolve was firm. He just wasn’t sure he could trust himself to live up to it. Which was another major reason he’d left Boston, and everything and everyone familiar to him, behind.

“Maybe, at some point,” he said. “But not here in town. Not where anyone might see us together.”

“I’m sure that could be arranged,” Cassie said, grinning over her shoulder at him as they stepped back into the clinic. “My husband could probably fool God if he tried hard enough.”

Leaving Cassie his cell phone number, with the understanding that she’d let him know what Sam said regarding the favor he’d asked, Josh let her turn him over to Hope, who gave him a starter pack of something called puppy pads, a plastic container of vitamins and a small bag of dog food—all of which he carried out to the back of the SUV.

When he returned, she handed him a leash attached to the ten-pound mass of jumping and peeing fur he’d just agreed to take home with him.

If only his mother could see him now.

CHAPTER FIVE

“DANA, WHERE SHOULD I put this towel?” At the sound of Lori’s voice on Saturday morning, Dana turned from the desk in her little living room where she was typing on her laptop. The girl had called sometime after ten the night before and told her Marissa’s boyfriend was spending part of the night at the dorm.

“Just hang the towels on the hook on the back of the door,” she told the younger woman. “In case you need them again. I’ll wash them the next time I do laundry.”

Kitty Kari, who’d been curled up on the corner of the desk, woke, stretched and, when her paw knocked against the edge of the laptop, started patting at the screen.

Lori grabbed her purse, keys and the backpack she’d brought her overnight paraphernalia in.

“You going home for Thanksgiving?” Dana asked.

“I’m not sure. If my dad’s going to be there, yes. I’m not leaving him there alone.”

“If?”

“A couple of his mining buddies have been talking about taking a hunting trip over the holidays. If they go, he will, too.”

“Has he done that before?”

“No, but I think he’d have liked to. He wouldn’t have left me home alone, though.”

Daniel wouldn’t have left Dana home alone, either. He just wouldn’t have played video games with her like he had with his two biological daughters. And he wouldn’t have asked the other two to help with the cooking or the dishes.

They’d done that on their own. Her half sisters, Rebecca and Lindsey—twenty and twenty-two, respectively—were good girls. Good sisters. To a point.

They just didn’t go to bat for her. Not that she blamed them. Her mother hadn’t, either.

And Dana didn’t blame Susan Harris for that choice. For an earlier one, yes, but not that one.

“Well, if you’re in town, you’re welcome to come over here. I’m getting a big turkey and making dinner for anyone at school who can’t make it home for the holiday.” She loved cooking Thanksgiving dinner. And even though the holiday was still three weeks away, she’d already started buying groceries as they went on sale.

“If I’m in town, I’ll help you cook,” Lori said and, thanking Dana for letting her crash at her place, let herself out.

Eight o’clock in the morning and she had her whole day ahead of her. As soon as she got her English paper done, that was. The five-hundred-word essay was due on Monday. And while Dana had an A in the class—straight As in all of her classes, actually—she wouldn’t be able to maintain her grades if she didn’t turn her work in on time.

She was two sentences farther along when her phone rang.

It was Jerome, from her English class. He’d lost part of his grant and was low on cash. He’d shown up for class one day in jeans that were wrinkled and had a stain at the knee and she’d made a joke about a rough night. He’d replied that he didn’t have enough money for laundry and was wearing things until they stank—at which time she’d offered him the use of her washer and dryer.

He’d been over every Saturday for the past three weeks. And was calling to ask if he could use her facilities again.

She told him that he was welcome, took a break from her laptop to clear her as yet unwashed clothes out of the washing machine and went back to work. Another paragraph, rewritten four times, and Jerome was at the door. She let him in and returned to her desk.

She heard him in the kitchen, settling at her kitchen table with his own laptop and thought to call out, “You going home for Thanksgiving?”

“No,” he answered back. “My folks and I decided to save the money so I could fly home for Christmas break instead of driving. It’ll give us four more days together.”

Jerome was from Missouri.

“I’m making dinner here for anyone who can’t get home,” she said. “You’re welcome to join us.”

“Cool. I’m there,” the eighteen-year-old said. “I’m no cook, but I know how to load a dishwasher.”

“Then dishwasher loader you are,” she said. Kari pounced on her keyboard, typing a series of As, just as Dana’s cell phone rang. “Hello?” she answered.

“Dana Harris?”

She recognized the voice. There was no reason to—she’d only heard it briefly—but she did.

“Yes.”

“This is Josh Redmond. I met you—”

“I remember you, Josh. I was going to call you in a little while to see how you and Little Guy are doing. I didn’t want to call too early.” With it being Saturday and all.

“The middle of the night wouldn’t have been too early,” the man said with a tired-sounding chuckle.

Dana remembered her own sleepless state a few days before. “He whined all night?” she said. She should have warned him. But why borrow trouble? The puppy might not have whined at Josh’s place.

And Little Guy needed a home.

But they needed it to be a good home, so that he would have a permanent home. And that’s where she came in.

“He whined. And then yelped. And pooped and peed. And whined some more.”

“Did you bring him into bed with you?” Most pet lovers knew how to solve separation anxiety issues. Or resolved to put up with the whining for the little bit of time it would take to train the animal to sleep alone.

“Hell, no, I didn’t bring it to bed with me!” Josh sounded affronted. “Why would I do that?”

"To get some sleep," she said calmly, not sure they'd made the right choice in a home for Little Guy. Some animal shelters gave animals away to pretty much anyone who stopped in. A home was better than no home. But...

"I'm not sure how you think I'd sleep any better with him whining next to my ear than I did with him howling from the kennel in the bathroom," he said. "I started him out with a pet bed in the kennel, but he chewed on that and left foam everywhere. So I tried a blanket. He peed on it. He ripped up the puppy pad and..."

The man was clearly beside himself. If she hadn't been worried about Little Guy's future, Dana would have smiled.

"Have you ever had a dog before, Josh?"

She'd assumed, since he'd been at the veterinary clinic, and seemed eager to take the dog, that he was an experienced pet owner.

"No."

"You're a cat person, then?"

"No."

"Horses?"

"I've never had so much as a goldfish."

Dana's heart sank. She could hear Jerome in the tiny laundry room off the kitchen, moving clothes from the washer to the dryer.

"You've never had a pet?" She'd grown up with a kennel of them. Literally. And had made more than one road trip with her mother to deliver one of Susan's purebred poodles.

"No."

"And you're there alone?"

With a growing and teething puppy who was going to get huge?

"I live alone, yes."

He sounded tired. Frustrated. But he hadn't asked her to take Little Guy back. Or called the clinic and dropped him off there.

He'd called her. His pet counselor.

Anyone who owned pets had to start somewhere....

"How about if I drive out there," she heard herself suggesting before she'd fully thought about what she was saying. Her paper was three-quarters of the way finished. She had another day and a half before it was due. She could still make the movie she'd been hoping to see that afternoon. And the hair appointment she'd scheduled, if she was quick about it. "Puppies are a lot like two-year-olds...."

"I have no more experience with those than I do dogs," he inserted.

Her curiosity flared. Josh was easily a year or two older than she was. At least. He wore expensive shoes. Was new to town and single. Where had he been before he'd relocated to the middle of nowhere in the Arizona desert?

And why did he choose Shelter Valley?

It was absolutely none of her business. She'd spent too much time with her nose in books. Wanted to know everything about everyone.

"He's testing his boundaries," she told the slightly desperate-sounding man. "And probably suffering some anxiety, too. As soon as he feels secure, and knows what's expected of him, he'll settle down."

"How long does that normally take?"

"Could be a week, could be months." She had to be honest with him. For Little Guy's sake. As much as she wanted the puppy to have found a home, she didn't want him to stay if it wasn't the right place for him. "But there are some things you can do to make the process a lot easier on both of you," she added. "How about if I do your first house check this morning and see what we can do?"

"Would you?"

“Of course.”

“We aren’t taking you away from something important, are we?”

“Just homework,” she told him. “And I’m almost done.” Or she would be. Soon. “I’ll be there within the hour.”

Right after she showered and told Jerome to lock up after himself when he was through.

* * *

JOSH WASN’T READY for company. He’d hauled a rented trailer behind the SUV for the trip out to Arizona with his brown leather sofa and recliner, his sleep mattress and bed frame and the solid wood dresser he’d had made in Spain during a weekend jaunt with Michelle and another couple. He’d brought the butcher-block kitchen table because it was the one he’d grown up with and had snatched from his mother when she’d been redecorating after he left for college.

He had linens—more than he needed. And the kitchen things his mother had hired her housekeeper to outfit him with when they’d given him his condo in Boston as a gift for graduating from Harvard.

His housewarming gift had been a housekeeper of his own.

He’d brought his bicycle, with a promise to himself to get back to riding it. His business books, a flat-screen for his bedroom and one for the front room, his stereo. And very little else.

Not even a trash can, or trash bags, he’d realized during the night when he’d had no place to put the puppy’s soiled towels.

He hadn’t brought paper towels, either. Or cleaning supplies. And he’d found that while toilet paper was good enough for human waste, it didn’t stand up to the messes his new housemate made.

An early-morning trip to the big-box store outside of town had taken care of the basics. He’d already used up a full roll of paper towels. Filled two trash bags with smelly and destroyed goods and hadn’t made his bed.

Or showered, either, for that matter. There’d been the little issue of soap. He’d had the toiletry bag he’d used on the road, the one he always traveled with and that he’d kept stocked with the supplies his housekeeper bought for him. He’d just never had to stop and think about such things as soap before. It was embarrassing to realize that he was a grown man who’d never done a thing to take care of himself. Including buying a bar of soap.

He definitely wasn’t ready for company, but neither could he afford to turn away the help from Pretty Pet Woman, who was giving up her Saturday to help him. Remembering her homework comment, he wondered if she was a student at the university. She’d seemed older to him.

He heard her car in the driveway and watched through his uncurtained front window as she climbed out, hooked a big brown satchel on her shoulder and shut the door of the old Mazda behind her. Mazdas weren’t bad cars. He’d never ridden in one but he’d read reviews. Their engines were decent.

The woman, Dana, looked even better this morning. Her jeans weren’t designer, by any means, but they fit her snugly and accentuated her long legs. Josh wasn’t swearing off women. But he’d sworn off commitment—relationships where someone was going to count on him. He wasn’t going to risk letting someone else down.

“Where’s Little Guy?” she asked after he let her into the modest, three-bedroom, two-bathroom home he’d rented on a month-to-month basis until he could find something he could afford to purchase.

She didn’t seem to notice the house. Or him, either, for which he was thankful, considering the day-old jeans...and beard...he was sporting.

He wouldn’t have been caught dead looking like this outside his bedroom in Boston.

“He’s back here,” he said, leading the way to the spare bathroom that was now completely taken up by the kennel.

As soon as they got close, the puppy started to howl again, saving Josh from the need to make conversation with the woman whose plain black sweater hugged her breasts. He was pissed at himself for noticing.

Maybe once the dog was settled he'd head into Phoenix for the night, find a club and a willing woman. Even without the Redmond money backing him, he shouldn't have any trouble finding someone to hook up with. "Oh...my..."

Dana Harris was kneeling in front of the kennel door, unlatching the hooked closure. The puppy—drenched in pee again, judging by the whiff of air Josh caught as the demon hurled itself at Dana's chest—squealed with delight when he saw his visitor.

And then Josh caught a glimpse inside the bathroom. The dog had done a number two in his kennel again. How could any being excrete waste so many times in one day? And he'd also reached through the bars to find the roll of toilet paper Josh had erringly left on the floor beside the kennel. It was smeared with puppy doo, ripped up into little pieces and now...scraps of it were everywhere those flailing, awkward paws could put it.

"Hey, Little Guy, what've you got going on here?" Dana asked with a voice he wouldn't mind hearing directed at him. The woman, who was obviously a lot more comfortable around animals than Josh was, held the squirming ball of fur up and away from her as she lifted him from the kennel to the sink in one swift arc.

"I'll need a towel, some soap and a glass if you have one," she said over her shoulder, already running water lightly into the basin as the dog did everything he could to claw himself away from the water and up her shirt. Somehow she managed to hold on to him—and keep him at bay.

Josh didn't need a second invitation to vacate the scene of the disaster. Grabbing a couple of rolls of paper towels, a bottle of dog shampoo and his travel coffee mug, he made his way back to the bathroom. Josh wasn't a religious man, but he prayed, anyway, all the way back to the bathroom where he could hear his rescuer in a continuous monologue with his new housemate.

He prayed, not for freedom from the demon, but for the dog's very quick acclimation to the right way to live in a home. Josh was on a personal mission to think of others, to be aware of their needs and put them before his own, so the dog was staying.

He was going to keep it alive and well if it killed him.

Which it might.

Hurrying back into the bathroom with his sleeves rolled up and with every intention of getting dirty, he found the puppy soaking docilely in the sink, a slightly sad and bedraggled-looking thing, shivering as Dana held him in place.

And for the first time since he'd rolled into Shelter Valley, Josh felt relief.

CHAPTER SIX

WHERE TO BEGIN?

Holding a wet and subdued but very clean Little Guy wrapped in paper towels in her arms, Dana stood in the hallway of the ranch-style home waiting while Josh Redmond cleaned up his spare bathroom. The man was a sorry case when it came to dog ownership. And almost equally inept at cleaning.

The kennel and floor he did on his hands and knees. Then he used the same sponge on the sink that he'd used on the floor and the kennel—and used up the rest of the roll of paper towels, too.

He was trying.

And for that, she was okay with leaving the puppy in his care.

Once they'd had a talk.

She might only be a pet-placement volunteer, but she'd been volunteering in the veterinary clinic at home in Richmond since she was old enough to drive herself to and from the facility, and Cassie and Zack were depending on her to make decisions regarding the animals' well-being and to report back to them if she thought there was a problem.

Knowing Little Guy as well as she did, she suggested that they have their first discussion outside, where the puppy could roam at will and not destroy anything.

Josh Redmond had no patio furniture. Or anything else in the six-foot-high block-fenced backyard with dirt and a few weeds for landscaping. Warm enough in her sweater, as long as she stayed in the sunshine, Dana stood on the small cement patio and watched the puppy as she said, “First problem, the kennel’s too big.”

Little Guy tripped over his front paws and rolled onto his head.

“I was told he was going to be a minimum of fifty pounds.”

“Eventually, yes. In the meantime, you can borrow kennels from the vet’s. It’s part of the service we offer the Love To Go Around adoptive families. His kennel should only be big enough for him to turn around in. It’ll help him feel more secure and dogs typically don’t go to the bathroom where they sleep, so if the kennel is only big enough for him to sleep in, chances are he won’t go to the bathroom until you come get him. And then, after he relieves himself outside, you praise him with great gusto so he’ll know he pleased you. That’s his goal in life, to please you.”

She was rambling. Sticking to what she knew best so she didn’t feel self-conscious and stupid. Dana had dated in high school. And had one serious boyfriend before Daniel had hooked her up with Keith, the troubled son of Daniel’s best friend, and made it almost impossible for her to keep peace in the family unless she agreed to date him.

But this was different. Josh Redmond was beyond gorgeous. And she was alone in his house with him.

“Did you keep him in a kennel during the couple of days you had him?” Josh asked.

“No, I didn’t have one. I locked him in the bathroom the first night. For about an hour.”

“And then what?” He quirked an eyebrow as he stood halfway across the patio, hands in his pockets, watching her.

The puppy bounded across the yard, falling as he went.

“I brought him into bed with me.”

“To pee on your sheets? And mattress?”

“He didn’t pee. But if you’re worried that he might, you could put down a puppy pad.”

“What if he moves off from it?”

“If you’re a light sleeper like me, you’ll wake up and put him back on it.”

He studied her as if she was from another planet. “You’ve done this with a puppy before?”

“Several of them. My mom raises poodles, breeds them and sells them all over the country. My sisters were never really interested in helping, but I was.”

“Are they around here? Your family?”

He seemed genuinely interested, but she wasn’t. Not in having this conversation with him. Or thinking about how second rate she always felt when she thought of her family. So she shook her head and said, “It also helps, if you’re going to keep him in a kennel, to have some kind of rhythmic noise beside him. Like an old-fashioned alarm clock. Or maybe some classical music playing softly.”

The puppy had his nose pressed into a weed.

“Have you ever had a dog keep you up all night?”

It sounded, at the moment, like a full night’s rest would be more valuable to him than winning the lottery. And he’d only had the puppy one night!

What was the guy going to do if he ever got married and had kids?

Thinking of him as a father—and what he’d have to do to get to that point—brought her thoughts to a screeching halt.

“Mom gave me a puppy for my thirteenth birthday—and a little kennel, too—so that I could keep her in my room. She wouldn’t be quiet in the kennel. And she wouldn’t lie down on the pads and go to sleep, either. I was afraid she was going to be whisked away from me and back out to the climate-controlled kennels Mom had in the backyard so I moved the little kennel onto my bed. The

puppy was only four pounds so the kennel didn't take up much room. I threaded my fingers through the bars of the kennel and the puppy curled up next to them and went to sleep. We slept like that for about a month, until she was house-trained, and for the rest of her life she slept curled up by my side every single night."

He shook his head, as though he'd been transported to a very strange and unknown land.

She wondered about him again. About where he'd come from. And why someone as obviously educated and gorgeous as he was had landed in a place as out of the way as Shelter Valley.

"For the rest of her life? She died?"

"Yeah, the life expectancy of a toy poodle is anywhere from twelve to fifteen years, though we had one live to be eighteen. My little girl made it to twelve and died of congenital heart failure."

"You got her for your thirteenth birthday?"

"Yeah."

"So how old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"Then you just lost her?"

"This past summer. Right about the time I got the Montford scholarship."

He asked her about the scholarship. She told him the same thing she'd told Cassie Tate Montford. And then she said, "We've been out here fifteen minutes."

"About that."

"Has your puppy gone to the bathroom?"

He looked at Little Guy. It was the first time Dana had seen him glance the puppy's way.

"I... He's contained and amusing himself. I didn't think...I don't know—has he gone to the bathroom?"

"Probably not because he hasn't had anything to eat or drink since he made such a mess inside. But the first rule of house-training a puppy is that you watch him every second he's out in the yard and praise him immediately every single time he does his business. Either variety. And conversely, from this point forward, every single time he goes in the house, even if you don't think it's his fault, like maybe you forgot to put him out, or he'd been alone too long, you have to scold him. The sooner he figures out that you're not pleased whenever he goes in the house and that you are pleased when he goes outside, the sooner he'll start to hold his business until you put him outside."

She was rambling again. The guy was going to think she was a big geek.

And maybe she was. Mostly she was okay with that. So why not now? It wasn't like this Josh Redmond was anyone special.

"And another thing," she added, because she felt awkward, standing there gawking at him, "you need to schedule an appointment with Cassie or Zack to have him neutered."

"Neutered..."

"Yeah, it's free when you adopt a pet, and because he's a boy, you want to have it done as soon as it's safe to do so."

"You have something against boys?"

"Of course not." She concentrated on the dog, not the man. "He squats when he pees." She forced the words past the dryness in her throat. "Mature male dogs, if they aren't neutered early, lift their leg to pee. It's a territorial marking thing. You don't want that. Once a male starts spraying you can have a hard time keeping him from marking his territory inside as well as out."

"I'll call the clinic Monday morning and make an appointment to have him neutered."

"We don't know how old he is for sure, but he can be neutered at eight weeks so they should be able to do it."

She talked to him about feeding schedules and about establishing who was the boss from the onset.

The puppy went to the bathroom. Dana told Josh to praise him. And grinned when he did so. There was something very endearing about such a perfect specimen of manhood bending over and congratulating ten pounds of matted fur on the little pile he'd just dropped. If there was a self-conscious bone in Josh Redmond's body, he sure didn't seem aware of its existence.

Maybe that was what endeared him to her more than anything else.

And when, another couple of minutes later, the puppy peed, Josh congratulated him again and they moved back into the house. He invited her to sit at his kitchen table. He offered her some iced tea and she accepted. "Here," he said, drawing her attention to the can he held out to her.

"Oh, sorry," she said, feeling the heat rise up to her cheeks. She'd been busy staring at the arsenal of cleaning supplies on the kitchen table. "It's just—" she glanced back at the table "—laundry detergent, hand soap, liquid body soap, dish soap, dishwasher soap, bar soap, car wash, carpet detergent, upholstery cleaner..." They were all lined up, obviously brand-new, two brands of every single item.

"I...am on a mission to try the top two brands of each to find out which I like best," he said.

She had the distinct feeling that he was making up every word as he went along. Someone who liked to clean also had brand preferences for every job.

But it wasn't her business.

"Have you picked a name for him?" she asked instead, pointing to the puppy who was sound asleep with his head flopped against Josh's chest.

He shook his head. "It didn't occur to me."

"The quickest way to teach him to come when he's called is to call him only by one name, and to say that name every single time you speak to him. When you feed him, say his name and then the word eat, and put his food down. He'll learn what eat means, too."

"You called him Little Guy."

"Because he's male and little and I specifically was not naming him as I knew I wasn't going to be able to keep him."

"Did you want to?"

He was getting personal again. This wasn't about her. Though...she kind of wanted it to be.

And while Dana was all about living her new life, about believing that she was just as good as everyone else, she wasn't so far along on her journey that she was going to pursue the guy who had to be the hottest bachelor in town.

"I didn't think I wanted another puppy, not anytime soon. I've got a kitten now. And my duplex is small. But after having Little Guy around for a couple of days...yeah, I'd like another puppy. A smaller one, though."

"You should get one, then."

Maybe. "Anyway, I recommend naming him. Soon."

"I like Little Guy. It's what he is."

"He's going to be huge."

"So...all the more reason to remind him that no matter how big he gets, I'll still be bigger, right?"

He grinned. She melted.

And got the hell out of there.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JOSH DIDN'T HAVE to wait until Monday to speak with Cassie Montford. His cell phone rang shortly after Dana Harris left Saturday, and he recognized the veterinarian's number.

"Josh? This is Cassie Montford."

Montford. Not Tate. She was on family business. He stiffened. "I assume you spoke with your husband?" he said, the Redmond in him coming out as he prepared to take control of the situation. To take control and not give off an iota of the emotion roiling around inside him. Getting his own way was all that mattered.

He didn't want to leave town. Didn't have any idea where he'd go.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get back to you," the older woman said. "I spoke with Sam last night but by the time we were alone and could talk it was too late to call you back. And I just got out of surgery now—a dog was hit by a car outside of town this morning...."

It had been less than twenty-four hours. Josh had expected their decision to take at least through the weekend. In Boston, it would have. The pros and cons of upholding a family secret would have been weighed very seriously.

"Sam and I will keep your secret for as long as we can without anyone being hurt," Cassie said, her voice sounding even warmer than it had the day before at her office.

More personal.

"Sam has a request, though, Josh. He really wants to meet you."

Ready to respond with an unequivocal no, until he was a little more certain he could trust himself, Josh didn't get the chance.

"I've managed to rein him in for now, with a threat to tell his parents some things about his past that he doesn't want them to know."

It sounded like a stunt any number of wives in his Boston circle might have pulled. It was all about keeping up appearances.

"Not that I'd carry through with the threat, which he knows, but he got the point, anyway. Sometimes people need some space to work through their issues on their own."

He swallowed. "I... Thank you," he said.

He wanted to say more. To ask more. To find out more about Sam Montford's life. About the secrets that he didn't want his parents to know...the fodder that gave his wife some leverage.

But he was determined to stick with his promise.

He asked about Little Guy's surgery, set a date for the week after Thanksgiving and started to ring off.

"Josh?"

He put the cell phone back to his ear. "Yes?"

"I can't promise that Sam will wait forever," she said. "My husband has a bit of a wild streak. When it gets ahold of him, he's apt to do something off the wall."

"Has he had run-ins with the law?" he asked. He couldn't imagine his mother being gung ho about claiming her Arizona family if he had.

"Absolutely not. Sam's never been in trouble with the law. Have you?"

Too late he saw what his question had implied. He quickly said, "No. I don't have a criminal record." It was the truth. He'd never even received a speeding ticket.

Hard to believe, when a woman had lost her life because of his carelessness. He'd walked away without paying any price at all.

"Sam's just a bit of a social rogue," Cassie said. "He says what he thinks, and when he believes in something he goes after it, regardless of what it costs him. He's just found out he has a new cousin in town. And having grown up as the only son of the town's founding family, he's anxious to make your acquaintance. All I'm saying is don't be surprised if you come home some night and find him drinking a beer on your back porch."

Something Josh might have done if the situation were reversed...

Stop. He implored silently. This wasn't going to work if he got in with the family. He'd fall back on his old ways. Become someone he hated.

"Also, just so you know, there's another cousin here in town. Ben Sanders. He's fairly new to the family, as well, but biologically, he's a Montford. Ben's married to Tory and they have two daughters."

Did Cassie and Sam have children, too? There hadn't been children in their family since he'd grown up...

And he didn't want to know any of this.

“One other thing,” he said, realizing that he’d almost hung up without taking care of the thing he needed most from her. “Will you write to my mother? Let her know that all is well?”

He hated being beholden to anyone. For anything. To his way of thinking, if he needed something done, he paid someone to do it. Except he couldn’t afford that anymore.

“Is she on email?” Cassie asked.

“Yes.” He waited while Cassie retrieved a pen and took down his mother’s email address.

“So she knows you’re here already?”

“Of course. She knows where I am 24/7,” he said. “She always has. It’s about the only thing she’s ever asked of me.”

At least, the only thing she’d asked that he’d heard and complied with.

He wasn’t ready to know about all the times he hadn’t listened, wasn’t ready to be accountable for all the hurt he must have caused his mother over the years.

But he was getting there. One day at a time.

* * *

LORI WAS BACK Sunday afternoon, but only to drop off a catnip toy she’d bought for Kari, a thank-you to Dana for letting her spend the night twice that week.

She also let her know that she’d be in town for Thanksgiving and would love to help cook if Dana’s dinner offer still stood.

Sensing that the girl’s feelings were hurt by her father’s choice to go hunting instead of spending the holidays with her, Dana invited Lori in on the pretense of planning the menu for the holiday. She was planning to cook enough food for twenty people to come and go throughout the day. If she had lots of leftovers, all the better. She just didn’t want to run out.

What she hadn’t expected, while she and Lori were sitting at the kitchen table just before dark, was for the other woman to ask about Josh.

“Did you invite Little Guy’s new owner?” Lori asked, tapping a finger on the edge of the tablet she’d been using to keep their list.

“No.” She hadn’t even thought about it. And she should have. She’d planned to invite everyone she came in contact with that she knew was alone. Or even might be alone.

“I thought you said he’s new to town. And lives alone.”

“Yeah, he is. And he does.”

“Did you not invite him because he’s not a student like us?”

“He’s not much older than I am. Three or four years, maybe.”

She’d seen a soiled Harvard shirt thrown on top of the washer when she’d taken her empty tea can into the laundry room to throw it away. Emblazoned on it was a year four years prior to what hers would have been had she gone to college straight out of high school.

She’d asked him if Harvard was his alma mater.

And as he’d answered in the affirmative, he’d sounded slightly lost again.

“I think he went to college on scholarship,” she said now, saying out loud what she’d thought at the time. His reaction to having been a student at Harvard had been odd. It had reminded her of how she’d felt working at the furniture store, bearing the same last name as the one written on the marquee out front, but not being an heir to the business.

She was a Harris, but the name had been given to her, not earned consequence of biology.

After she and Daniel had found out about the lie her mother had told them both about Dana’s parentage, Dana had not only been taken out of Daniel’s will, but shuffled to the back corner of the family.

She’d felt like a modern-day Cinderella. And Josh Redmond seemed to have the same reaction when asked about his alma mater.

“He’s a nice guy,” she told Lori, remembering how Josh had gotten down on the floor to clean up his dog’s mess without a moment’s hesitation. “I was afraid, when I saw the state his bathroom

was in, and this after he'd already lost a night's sleep, that he was going to tell me to take Little Guy back. But he never even hinted at wanting to get rid of him."

"I hear he's gorgeous. A friend of mine had to go to the business office Friday afternoon to see to something about her scholarship and he was there, introducing himself. She told me about him because he was so hot, but when you told me about Little Guy's new owner, I knew it had to be the same guy. I guess he starts work on Monday. He has an office upstairs in the admin building."

Dana wasn't going fishing for information. But she wasn't above listening to gossip.

"I can't believe someone as hot as he is doesn't have a girlfriend. Or a wife," Lori said.

"I know, right?" Dana agreed. And remembered the soulful look in Josh's eyes. The lost look. "I wondered if he was married and his wife died," she said. "I don't know that, so don't say anything to anyone. I honestly have no idea and don't want to start rumors. I just...like you, I find it hard to believe that he's way out here starting a new life all alone."

"Yeah, well, if this town's anything like Bisbee, I'm guessing it won't be long before we all know who he is and where he came from."

Which suited Dana just fine. The one thing she could not tolerate, on any level, was someone keeping their identity secret. Broken-heart secrets were fine. Everyone had a right to their privacy.

But not to lie about who they were. In a bigger town, like Richmond, a person could show up and claim they were anyone and no one bothered to look past the words. To know that they were lies.

Innocent people got hurt by those kinds of lies.

Lives were ruined by them.

Anyone who didn't believe her could just ask her stepfather. The man who'd once thought she was the brightest apple of his eye.

And, later, couldn't bear to look at her at all. Because she had another man's eyes.

* * *

SOAPS OF ALL KINDS had found their temporary home on the shelf above the washing machine. Lined up by type, they fit. One by one he'd try them out. See what was good or bad about the different kinds and land on the brand he liked.

And it was his own damned fault that he hadn't known what had worked until now. He knew who had worked for him: her name was Betty Carmichael. She was in her mid-fifties and had a family with children and grandchildren—he wasn't sure how many—and he liked her a lot. She'd come with the condo he'd received upon his graduation from Harvard.

It seemed so long ago now. Hard to believe that in eight years of working and flying around the world, taking on daring adventures and making life about his own enjoyment, he'd never once thought about making a home for himself.

Michelle would have taken care of that.

And he'd have been perfectly content to let her do so.

Just as he'd been content to let Betty do all of his shopping for him, to make his choices for him, down to what kind of toilet paper and toothpaste he used. Hell, he hadn't even had to find the pack of toilet paper and take out a roll, which might have given him a clue to what kind it was...maybe. No, there'd been brass cylinders beside every commode in the condo, each holding four rolls, and Betty had always kept them filled.

She'd worked every single day that he was in town. And was off whenever he was gone. The arrangement had suited him. And apparently it had suited her, as well.

He hoped her new employer, the couple who'd purchased the condo and agreed to keep her on, would be good to her.

Little Guy woke up. Josh turned as soon as he heard the movement in the kennel on the kitchen counter behind him.

Before the puppy could so much as stretch, Josh had him out of his cage and out the back door. He was getting this part down. Having been peed on during his way out the door twice in the past twenty-four hours, he was learning the hard way.

But he was learning and he had a question. Pulling out his phone, he easily found the number he needed from his recent call list and hit the send button.

Standing outside, watching every move the puppy made as he trampled over his feet in the dirt, Josh listened to the line ring. Little Guy had only been asleep for an hour. And he'd gone to the bathroom right before Josh had put him in the kennel. It was possible he didn't have business to do.

"Hello?" She answered on the third ring.

"Dana? It's Josh. I hope I'm not disturbing you..."

"Of course not. What's up? How's Little Guy doing?"

"Fine," he was pleased to report. The dog might be a little confused by an owner who seemed to know less than he did, but Little Guy was clean, all of his parts were still working, there was no blood, no broken bones....

"Did you get some sleep?"

"Yes. Plenty of it." As soon as he'd hung up from Cassie the day before, he'd purchased a new, much smaller kennel, come home and cleaned out the larger kennel, bathed the puppy another time, showered himself off, put the kennel on the side of his expensive mattress and slept until dark.

And then he'd repeated the process a few hours later when he'd stripped down and gone to bed.

He'd stopped at putting his hand in the kennel. He had to be able to move in his sleep. And Little Guy hadn't pushed him that far.

"So what's up?" the woman asked again, and Josh wondered if he was interrupting something. And wished she had all the time in the world. He was tired of his own company.

His life was so out of kilter at the moment. Other than the family he'd sworn off, and the business associates he'd met but couldn't name, he didn't know anyone in this town except for Dana Harris. Hell, he didn't even know himself all that well at the moment.

"I was wondering about tomorrow," he said, still watching the puppy. The idiot thing was batting at a cricket on the patio and missing by a mile. "I have to work from eight until five. I figure I can come home for lunch, but it can't be good to leave this guy alone in such a small kennel for so many hours at a time."

"People have to work," Dana said slowly. "And puppies are almost always kenneled or in a box after birth. They're also kenneled when they're boarded. But then they tend to be a bit more rambunctious when they're set free," she said. "And if he's left too long and has to relieve himself in his kennel, that barrier is broken and he might go in his sleeping spot more regularly, and then it could take you longer to house-train him...."

How the woman fit so many words into one breath he didn't know. He'd never met anyone with so much to say all at once.

"I think I'd be stretching my welcome if I showed up the first day of my new job carrying a kennel with me," he said laconically.

Not that he'd ever actually worked a job where he had to answer to anyone other than himself—or his father, who pretty much let him do whatever the hell he damned well pleased.

"I could come by a couple of times during the day," Dana said while Josh was thinking about asking her, as part of her counseling position, to phone Cassie for him and see if she could arrange for some kind of day-sitting at the clinic.

He didn't trust himself to speak with his distant relative again, so soon. Her invitation to meet the family had been too damned tempting.

"If you trust me to be in your home without you there," Dana finished.

"Of course I trust you in my home." It wasn't as though there was a lot there for her to steal. He'd sold anything of real value. "But I can't ask you to give up your day for me."

This was his new life. He was supposed to be doing things for others. Or at the very least, not imposing on others.

"I'm not doing it for you," Dana said with a matter-of-fact tone. "I'm doing it for Little Guy. He needs a home and I don't have the space here to keep him."

That was all right, then.

"Do you really have time?"

"I've got breaks in between classes," she said. "It won't take anything at all for me to run out there. Besides, I miss him. I'd look forward to a little puppy playtime."

The woman was...intriguing. "What about work?" he asked her. Little Guy was chewing on his shoe. The pair he'd peed on.

"Just volunteer stuff," she said. "My scholarship provides for living expenses. And I worked for several years out of high school and have money saved," she continued, refreshing in her openness. Her honesty.

"What are you studying?"

"General business," she said and, muffling the phone, said goodbye to someone. What had she been doing when he'd called? What had he interrupted?

He should let her go. "You don't seem like the business type."

That was his world. Cold and calculating and nothing at all like a woman who got excited at the prospect of helping pets find good homes—helping people become good pet owners.

"My dream was to be a vet," she told him. "But I couldn't...afford...college right away, and it takes grad school in addition to a bachelor's degree. When this scholarship fell in my lap, for a bachelor's degree only, and knowing that I'd be thirty by the time I was in the job market, I figured it would be best to get a degree in something that would provide a good living rather than wishing on stars."

"I don't think being a veterinarian is wishing on stars." Cassie certainly wouldn't think so. Josh's mind rushed ahead of him. Maybe he should talk to her. See if there was something she could do to help Dana with some kind of monies for graduate school when the time came. There he was, thinking like a Redmond again. So easy to give out handouts when you didn't feel, in any way, the loss. Hell, what it would cost Dana to go to graduate school he'd spent on a week's vacation. More times than he could count.

"Maybe not," Dana said with a chuckle. "But I'm too practical to commit to so many years without a steady income."

"What about your family? They can't help?"

"No."

When she didn't say any more, Josh didn't push, figuring that her parents were probably strapped for cash, like most of the nation.

Shoving his hand in his pocket, he itched to pull out a wad of bills. To trade grad school for pet-sitting help. He pulled out two twenties instead, and pushed them back in his pants.

They were going to buy him lunches for the week.

"Anyway, I can stop by around ten in the morning," she said, her voice infused with its usual energy. "If you're there around noon, and I'm back at two, we should have him covered until you get home."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.