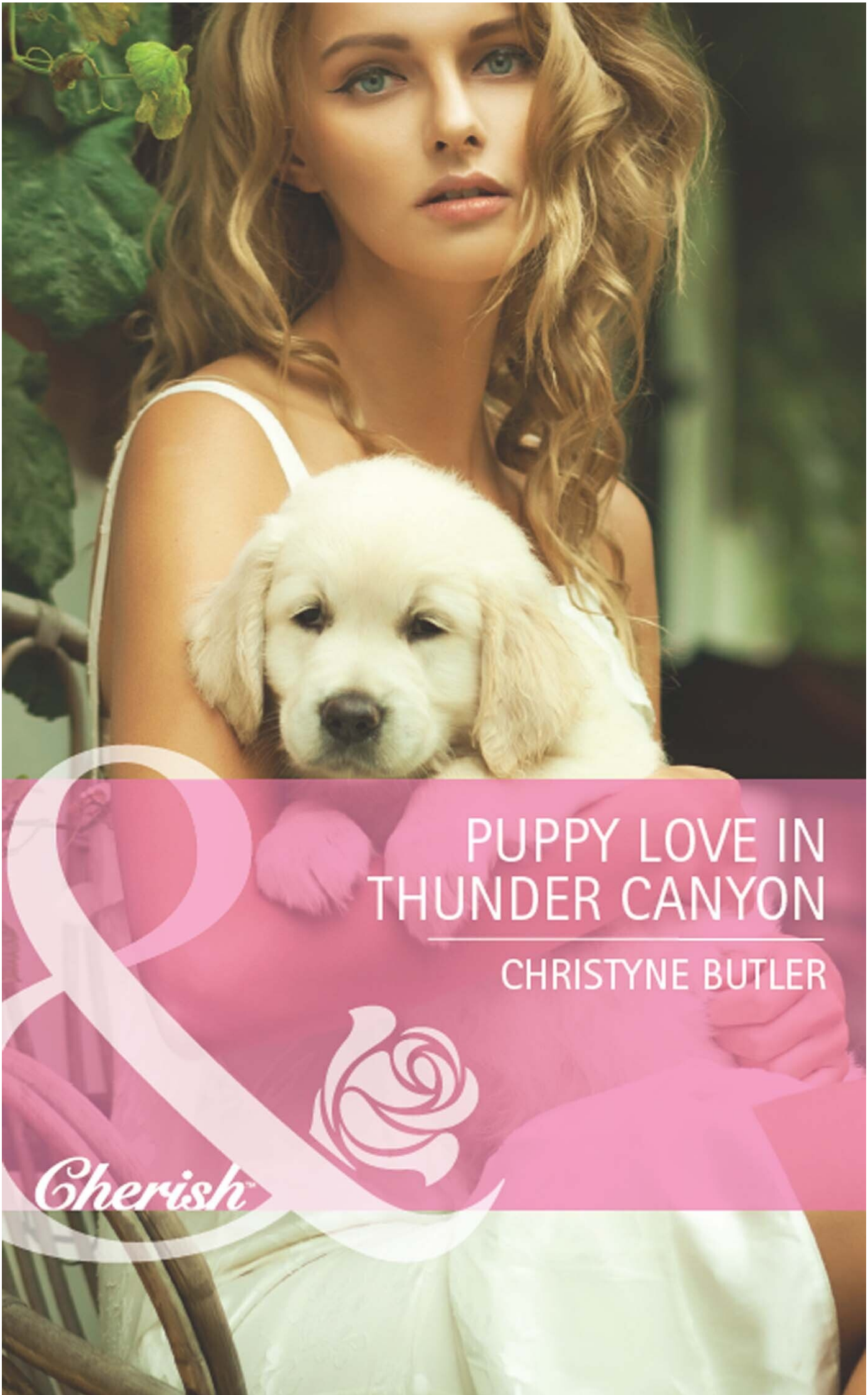

PUPPY LOVE IN THUNDER CANYON

CHRISTYNE BUTLER

Cherish

Mills & Boon Cherish

Christyne Butler

Puppy Love In Thunder Canyon

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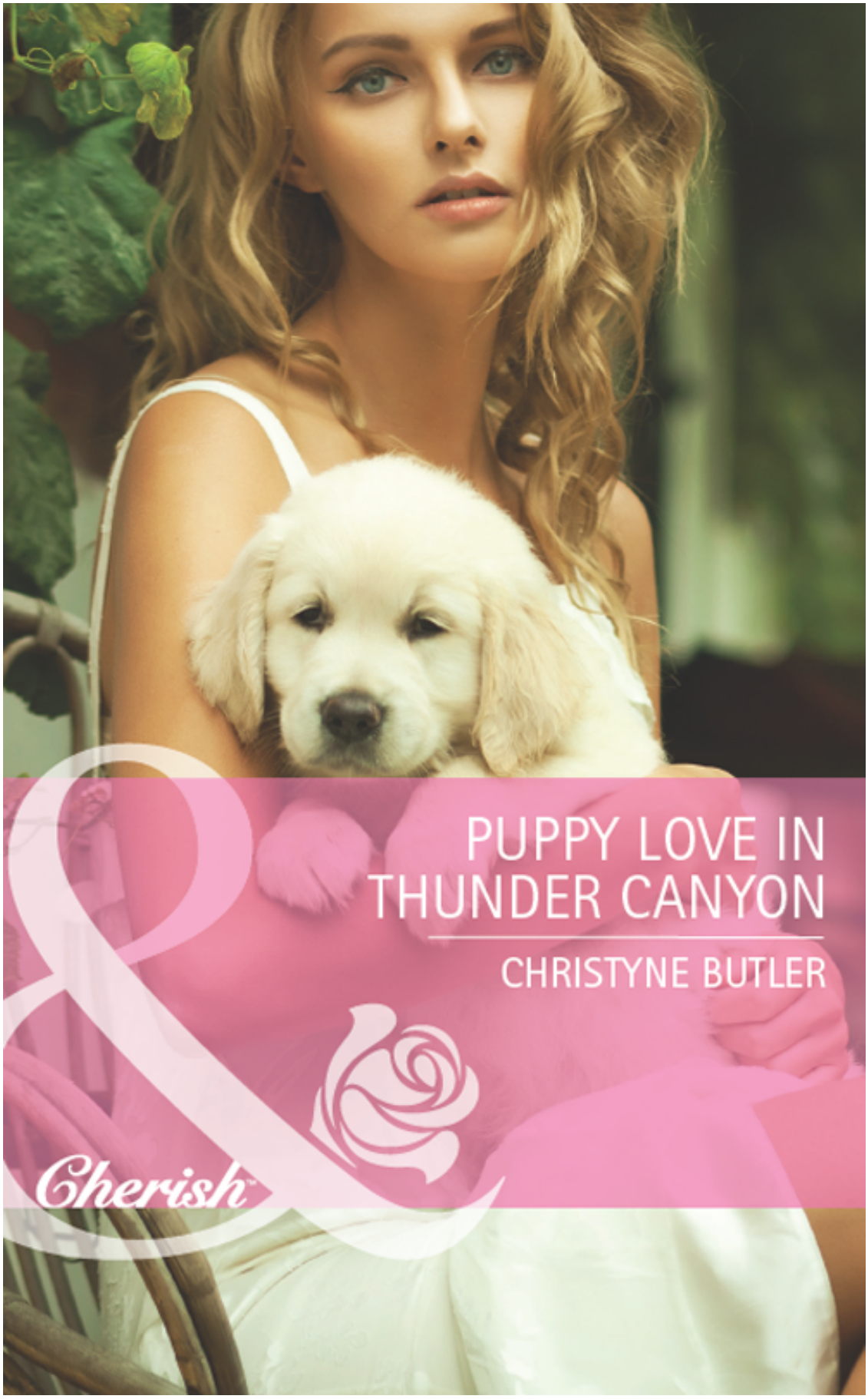
PUPPY LOVE IN
THUNDER CANYON
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“Look at me. Are you all right?”

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Forcing her gaze upward, she found icy blue eyes, serious and probing and perfectly matching his shirt, staring intently back at her.

Forget the stars.

This was a full-blown meteor shower.

Dear Reader,

Have you ever met someone who seemed to show up in your life just when you needed them? Well, Dr Thomas North might not realize it, but he’s been waiting for Annabel Cates, and her beloved golden retriever, Smiley, all his life. What he’s going to do with this vivacious blonde spitfire, her pup and the upheaval they cause to his well-ordered days is another question!

From the moment Annabel literally runs into the sexy and serious doctor, she knows what this man needs is a strong dose of love, both the human and puppy variety. Finding ways for these two very different, but perfectly matched people to fall in love is what made this story so much fun to write!

Being a fan of the Montana Mavericks for years, it was an honor to be asked to be a part of this amazing series that pays great tribute to the heart-and-home creed of Mills & Boon® Cherish™ with the wonderful families of Thunder Canyon, Montana.

I hope you enjoy their journey to happily-ever-after and please visit me at www.christynebutler.com or e-mail me at chris@christynebutler.com!

Christyne

About the Author

CHRISTYNE BUTLER fell in love with romance novels while serving in the United States Navy and started writing her own stories six years ago. She considers selling to Mills & Boon® Cherish™ a dream come true and enjoys writing contemporary romances full of life, love, a hint of laughter and perhaps a dash of danger, too. And there has to be a happily-ever-after or she's just not satisfied.

She lives with her family in central Massachusetts and loves to hear from her readers at chris@christynebutler.com. Or visit her website, www.christynebutler.com.

Puppy Love in Thunder Canyon

Christyne Butler

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To the ladies at WriteRomance, the best critique partners in the world: don't know what I would do without you!

And to Susan, Charles and Jennifer … you all know why

Chapter One

"Do you understand everything we talked about during the drive here?"

Annabel Cates pulled into an empty spot in the Thunder Canyon General Hospital parking lot. "I know these visits are routine by now, but it's important we cover the dos and don'ts every time."

She cut the engine, turned to the backseat of her practically new lime-green VW Bug and was rewarded with a sloppy kiss.

"Smiley!" Annabel pushed at the wet nose of her three-year-old golden retriever, her constant companion since she'd brought him home from the local shelter when he was just a pup. "You could've just nodded!"

An excited bark was her pet's answer.

"Yes, I love you, too." Releasing her seat belt, Annabel grabbed her purse and Smiley's leash and got out of her car, pausing to hold the driver's seat up to allow her dog to exit.

Kneeling, she latched the leash on to his collar then straightened the bright blue bandana around his neck, her fingers lingering over the black lettering on the material. "Just think, buddy, a dozen more sessions and we can switch this In Training bandana for one that reads Certified."

Smiley did the exact thing that earned him his name: he smiled. Many told her it was the natural curve of his mouth, a trait common in golden retrievers, but Annabel could tell when her fur baby was happy.

Which was just about all the time.

Smiley's outgoing, friendly personality, to both humans and other animals, made him a great therapy dog. The two of them had completed the required training, registration and certification over the past few months, but the American Kennel Club required fifty visits before being awarded the title of AKC Therapy Dog.

And Annabel wanted that title for Smiley, which didn't explain this particular visit.

"But this one is special, isn't it, boy?" Annabel gave Smiley a quick scratch to the ears then rose, and they walked across the hospital's parking lot.

Once inside, she stopped at the directory near the elevators. The geriatrics and children's areas were the most familiar to her and Smiley, but today they were headed for a specific doctor's office.

Smiley padded along beside her, staying right at her knee, despite the comments, grins and hellos that greeted them. Then a little boy sitting alone on a bench came into view and Annabel felt the familiar tug on the leash.

Almost by instinct, Smiley was drawn to those who were injured and hurting, but not all injuries were visible. A low whimper and the quickening of his wagging tail made the little boy look up. The beginnings of a smile crossed his face. Annabel slowed and allowed Smiley to work his magic.

After a few minutes visiting, Annabel continued on her way, energized by the boy's improved mood and excited chatter to his mother. They stopped outside the elevators and she eyed the hospital directory on the wall.

"Can I help you?"

Annabel turned and found a pretty nurse standing beside her dressed in scrubs, a short-sleeve shirt and loose cotton pants featuring a dizzying pattern of colorful flip-flops. Perfect for a warm August morning in Montana. "Yes, I'm looking for Dr. North's office."

The woman's eyebrows rose, disappearing into her perfect straight bangs. "Dr. Thomas North?"

"If he's an orthopedic surgeon, then yes, he's the one."

"Is Dr. North expecting you?" Her gaze shifted to Smiley for a moment. "Both of you?"

Living by the motto "it's better to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission," Annabel smiled. "We're here to visit with one of his patients."

"Oh. Well, his office suite is on the second floor, far left corner. I could show you if you'd like."

"That would be great, thanks."

The elevator dinged and seconds later the door opened. Annabel and Smiley waited for everyone to depart before they followed the nurse inside. Once on the second floor, they turned a few corners and moved into an office area. At the end of the long hallway Annabel finally spotted the nameplate for Dr. Thomas North.

"Hey, Marge. I've got a visitor for you."

The older woman sitting behind the desk was obviously Dr. North's secretary. Annabel smiled, not missing the glances between her and the nurse or the way her eyebrows rose in matching high arches, as well.

It was okay. She and Smiley were used to it.

"Can I help you, miss?" Marge asked as a beeping noise filled the air.

"Oh, shoot. I've got to go." The nurse checked her pager and smiled. "I so wanted to stick around and see this. Let me know what happens, okay?"

Marge gave her a quick wink and nodded.

A bit confused, Annabel offered her thanks. The nurse waved it off and then disappeared.

"Miss?"

Annabel turned back to the woman. "Oh, I was wondering if Forrest Traub has arrived for his appointment with Dr. North yet?"

"And you are?"

She opened her mouth to reply, but a low, measured voice came from over her shoulder.

"What are you doing here, Annabel?"

She whirled around, surprised to find the man she'd asked about had somehow snuck up on her. Not usually easy to do with Smiley close by. Annabel then noticed her dog remained sitting at her side, perfectly still, not even his tail moving as he stared intently up at Forrest.

And there was a lot to look at.

Tall, muscular, dark hair and the coolest light brown eyes. Yes, he was very nice to look at. Annabel was sure her sisters would use words like *yummy* and *sexy*. Even the two recently married ones, one of whom was the bride of Forrest's cousin, Jackson, would have to admit good looks ran strong in the Traub family tree.

Too bad the man did nothing for Annabel. No spark, no fizzle.

But that was fine with her. Annabel wanted more. She wanted true love.

The kind of love that came at you like a bolt of lightning and left you dazed, confused and tingly all over. She'd never felt that way in her life, but darn it, after a dry dating spell that had been going on for three years, she was ready for it!

"Hello?" Forrest leaned heavily on a cane with one hand while waving the other in her face. "Annabel?"

"Oh, sorry!" She blinked hard and chased away her dreams. "I … um, I'm here to see you."

His mouth pressed into a hard line as he looked down at Smiley. Annabel did the same, noticing how her pet returned the man's stare with a simple tilt of his head.

She wasn't sure who was sizing up whom.

"How did you know I was going to be at the hospital this morning?" he asked.

Her cheeks turned hot. "I overheard you talking to Jackson at the family barbecue yesterday."

He opened his mouth to say something, but Annabel kept talking. "I know you've been through so much since you got back from overseas. Even before then. And after all that time you spent at Walter Reed Medical Center to still need … well, I thought we could help."

Forrest sighed and directed his gaze to the secretary. "Would it be okay if I—if *we* waited for the doctor inside his office?"

A thrill raced through Annabel. It wasn't a complete victory, but it was a start.

"I'll take full responsibility for them being here," he continued. "And I really need to sit down."

The woman's blue eyes flickered toward the chairs in the corner of the room, but then she said, "Of course, please go in. The doctor is running late, but he should be here soon."

Forrest gestured toward the open doorway with a wave of his hand. Annabel gave a quick tug on the leash and entered the office, Smiley at her side. Forrest followed, and the doctor's secretary stood to close the door behind him.

It was a large room, with a wall of windows behind tightly closed blinds. Two chairs sat in front of a large desk with a more comfortable-looking leather couch along one wall.

Annabel stayed off to the side, not wanting to get in Forrest's way as he dropped into the closest chair. He jammed the cane she didn't remember him using yesterday into the armrest and closed his eyes. His right leg stuck out straight. The bulk of the brace underneath his jeans pulled the worn denim tight around his knee.

This time Smiley tugged a bit at the leash and Annabel released the slack, allowing the dog a bit more leeway while keeping a tight grip on the looped handle. Just in case.

Smiley had been with her yesterday at the barbecue, but he and Forrest didn't interact at all. Considering her pet's reaction to the man a few minutes ago, Annabel wanted to be sure she could pull him away if needed.

Seconds later Smiley was at Forrest's side, instinctively resting his furry head on the man's uninjured leg. Then a deep sigh echoed in the dog's chest.

A full minute passed before Forrest's large hand came to rest behind Smiley's ears, his fingers digging into the dog's thick coat.

Annabel titled her head back slightly and rolled her eyes, upward, pretending a sudden interest in the tiled ceiling. She'd learned it was the fastest way to stop the sharp stinging in her eyes.

Tears, or any sign of pity, were the last thing most people wanted.

The last thing Forrest Traub wanted.

He'd made that very clear while talking to his cousin yesterday about the reason he was in Thunder Canyon for the summer.

"So, Dr. North's secretary seemed a bit hesitant about us being in here." Annabel wanted to talk to Forrest about Smiley being a part of his upcoming medical treatment, but she couldn't just jump into the topic. Not when she'd taken it upon herself to be here instead of waiting for an invitation. "Me and Smiley, that is. Don't tell me your doctor is a stodgy, old curmudgeon who considers his office his inner sanctum?"

"He's not—"

"I'm only asking because the more senior the doctor the more they tend to think the only good medicine is the kind that comes in a pill or from the sharp end of a scalpel." She glanced around for clues, but wasn't close enough to see the graduation dates on the medical degrees hanging from the wall. "Wow, look at all those awards and certificates. Pretty impressive. Then again, this place could use some brightening, a splash of color. Everything in here is brown."

"Annabel—"

"No family photos on his desk. There's not even a plant," she pushed on, afraid if she shut up Forrest was going to kick her and her dog out. "His secretary practically has a jungle around her desk. You'd think she'd put at least one green leafy thing in her boss's office."

"Annabel, stop."

Forrest's soft, yet firm command included an unspoken request for her to look at him. She obeyed, while holding her breath.

"I know why you're here," he said.

She waited a moment, then air became a necessity. "You do?"

"I know all about the work you and your dog do."

"Smiley."

"Excuse me?"

"My dog's name is Smiley, and how do you know?"

"Your sister is very proud of you … and Smiley." Forrest looked down at the dog, continuing to scratch him behind his floppy ears. "But I don't think he can help me."

Annabel had heard those words, many times before and from many different types of people. Young children fighting diseases they couldn't pronounce, the elderly fighting to hold on to their memories and their dignity, and those fighting for the most important thing of all, hope.

"How do you feel?" she asked. "I mean, right now?"

Forrest shook his head. "Forget it, Annabel. I'm not going there."

"I'm not trying to psychoanalyze you." She moved closer. "And I know there's nothing medically we can do—"

"Good. That's my job."

Annabel whirled around at the very deep, very male voice coming from the open doorway.

She immediately cataloged a pair of men's shiny black shoes, dark slacks with a sharp crease down the center of each leg, a cobalt-blue shirt, striped tie and white lab coat.

Dr. Thomas North.

Before her perusal could get past a nicely chiseled jaw, Smiley bounced across the office, pulling his leash to its full length.

Offering an enthusiastic greeting that included a playful bark, her pet rose on his back legs and planted his front paws on the man's midsection.

The move knocked the doctor back against the door frame and sent the paperwork in his hands flying everywhere.

"Smiley!"

Horrified at her pet's unusual behavior, Annabel rushed to help. A quick tug on the collar and Smiley dropped back to all four paws on the ground, but the tail continued to wag up a storm.

"I'm so sorry!" She quickly wound the dog's lead around her palm, pulling him back to her side. "He usually doesn't act like this. I have no idea—" She then focused on the mess on the floor. "Oh, here, let me help you!"

Dropping to her knees, she started grabbing the loose pages and the manila folders, but the man in front of her mirrored her actions. Their heads collided with a resounding crack.

"Oh, fudge nuggets!" Annabel swore and fell backward, landing on her butt. She rubbed hard at the stinging at her temple hoping to erase the pain.

Darn, that hurt!

Suddenly, the warmth and strength of male hands, one capturing her rubbing fingers and the other cupping her jaw, caused a shiver to dance over her skin.

"Look at me. Are you all right?"

Annabel blinked hard as her world tilted. She could swear she saw a dizzying array of stars.

Forcing her gaze upward, she found icy blue eyes, serious and probing and perfectly matching his shirt, staring intently back at her.

Forget the stars.

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Thomas North knelt on the carpet, cringing at the wrinkled paperwork beneath his feet.

The last thing he'd expected when he hurried into his office, cursing himself for being late thanks to his weekly breakfast date with his grandmother, was to be attacked by an overgrown hairy beast.

Or by the woman who was obviously its owner.

"Hello, miss? Did you hear me? Are you okay?"

"Y-yes, I think so."

Ignoring how her breathy words warmed the inside of his wrist, then transformed into a tremor that raced up his entire arm, Thomas focused on her pale blue eyes. They seemed clear and bright, but her speech was a bit slow.

He waved his hand, holding up three fingers in front of the woman's face. "How many fingers do you see?"

"Two."

Hmm, not good.

His own head still smarted from where they'd come together with a hard *thunk*, but he didn't have any problem directing Forrest Traub back into the chair he started to rise from or to see the beautiful blonde on the floor in front of him.

Not to mention another blond, with four legs and a wet nose, who was getting in his way.

"And a thumb."

"Excuse me?"

"You're holding up two fingers, index and middle, and your thumb." She laid a hand on the dog's snout, where it tunneled into her loose waves at her shoulder. "I'm okay, Smiley. Please, sit."

The dog obeyed the woman's command, just barely, as its backside continued to shimmy, helped by the rapid wagging of its tail.

Thomas took the paperwork from the woman's grip, added it to the pile he'd shoved back into the top folder. He handed it all to his secretary, who stood over his right shoulder. "Can you put this back into some semblance of order, please?"

"Wow, how did you know she was standing there?" the woman asked, drawing his attention back to her.

"He's got eyes in the back of his head," his secretary quipped as she stepped around them and headed for his desk. "It's something they must teach them in medical school."

Thomas did what he always did when Marge got mouthy. Ignored her. She'd come with the office, having worked for his predecessor for a dozen years, and knew the inner workings of the hospital like the back of her hand. Thomas had only been at TC General two years and he'd be lost without her.

Concentrating on getting the woman back on her feet, he rose and held out one hand. "Do you think you can stand?"

"Of course I can."

She grabbed his wrist with a surprisingly strong grip, and pushed to her feet. He couldn't help but notice the dark polish on her bare toes, the snug fit of her jeans over curvy hips or how the loose ruffled neckline of her blouse had slipped to reveal one bare shoulder.

"Annabel, are you sure you're okay?" Forrest asked.

She turned her head, sending long waves of blond hair flying, covering that shoulder. "Yes, I'm fine."

Thomas swallowed hard and pulled from her heated touch, refocusing his attention on his patient and the reason he was here.

"I don't mind your girlfriend being at your appointment, Mr. Traub—" he moved to sit at his desk, not surprised to find Marge had already left the office, closing the door behind her "—but a dog is a different matter entirely."

"She's not my—"

"Oh, I'm not his girlfriend." The woman dropped into the second empty chair. "Forrest and I are practically family. I'm Annabel Cates."

Thomas tucked away the news these two weren't involved, and why he even cared, to concentrate on finding out what exactly was going on. "Then what are you and your dog doing in my office, Miss Cates?"

"Two reasons, moral support and a proposition you can't refuse."

Chapter Two

"Oh, and please call me Annabel. This is Smiley." Thomas watched the oversize furball move to sit between her and his patient, ears flopping as it looked back and forth between the two. Then the mutt leaned toward Forrest. Thomas was about to call out, until he saw how the dog rested its chin lightly on Traub's uninjured knee.

"Smiley is a certified therapy dog," she continued. "As his owner and handler, I've been trained and certified, as well. Because of Forrest's injury, and his ongoing treatment, I thought Smiley might be able to help."

He looked back to the woman. "Help how?"

"Therapy dogs are used to assist patients in dealing with the stress and uncertainty that comes with medical issues."

Thomas didn't put much stock in therapy dogs—or meditation, or aromatherapy, or any number of other alternative therapies that floated around out there.

All he believed in were cold, hard facts. And science.

"Miss Cates, I really don't have time for this. Your visit today is not authorized, by me or, I'm guessing, Mr. Traub, and is distracting to say the least."

"Oh, I don't mean to be any trouble—"

"You've already been that." Thomas dropped his hand to the folder in the middle of his desk, drumming his thumb repeatedly on the cover. An action her dog apparently took as a cue to perch its large front paws on the edge of his desk and swat its large, fluffy tail at the shoulder of Forrest Traub.

"Smiley, stop that and get down." She gently tugged at her dog's leash. "I'm so sorry, Dr. North. I promise you he never acts this way. I guess he must really like you."

"I doubt that."

The dog sat again and returned its attention to Forrest. Miss Cates did the same. "I guess this wasn't such a good idea. Maybe you can spend time with Smiley another day."

"I'd like you to stay." Traub laid his hand back on the dog's head. "Both of you."

Surprised by his patient's request, Thomas studied him closely, silently admitting the animal did seem to be having an impact on the man.

He and Forrest had only met twice before, the last time being a week ago when Thomas had performed a thorough examination of the ex-soldier's injured leg. Forrest had been withdrawn and testy, speaking only when asked a direct question.

In the subsequent reading of his military medical records, Thomas had found the former army sergeant had good reason for his surliness, having gone through hell after a roadside explosive destroyed the Humvee he was riding in during his last tour in Afghanistan.

He'd been in and out of hospitals for the past year and still had not regained full use of his leg. Today though, he seemed more relaxed, a hint of a smile on his face as he continued to scratch the animal's ears and neck.

Of course, this had to be temporary. Depression was common in veterans, as was post-traumatic stress, and Thomas couldn't see how patting a dog could counteract such difficult conditions. The only real cure for Forrest was in the skilled hands of a surgeon.

At any rate, the man clearly enjoyed the dog's company, so Thomas had no choice but to let the mongrel—and Miss Cates—stay.

"Fine." Thomas flipped open the folder. "We planned to discuss my findings and go over recommendations for further treatment. Are you comfortable discussing your condition in front of Miss Cates?"

"Don't worry about me. I've been present at doctor-patient consults before. Confidentiality isn't an issue," the blonde spitfire said with a wave of her hand. "I know how to keep a secret."

Thomas ignored her and waited for his patient to reply.

"Yeah, go ahead," Traub said.

"The results are a bit complex and cover a lot of technical jargon—"

"Get to the bottom line, doc."

Thomas did as requested. "You are going to need surgery. Again."

He waited, but Forrest's only reaction to the news was the fisting of his free hand while the other continued to dig deep into the dog's fur. Thomas glanced at Miss Cates, but her focus was on his ceiling as she blinked rapidly.

"How soon?" Forrest asked.

Thomas looked back at his patient. "The sooner the better. We can schedule you for next week."

The conversation continued for several minutes as Thomas outlined the presurgery preparations, what he planned to accomplish with the delicate procedure and the post-care that would be required.

"Okay, then. I'll see you next week." Forrest finally released his hold on the dog and grabbed his cane. Pushing to his feet, he held out his hand. "I'm betting on you to work your magic, doc."

Thomas rose and returned the man's firm grasp, determined to bring all his skills and knowledge to the operating room, like always. "You can count on it, Forrest."

The man returned Thomas's gaze for a long moment before he released his hand and turned away. "Annabel, I'll walk you to your car if you and Smiley are heading out?"

"That would be great, thanks." Rising, she held out her hand. "Dr. North, it was a pleasure. I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss the possibility of us working together in the future."

Thomas took her hand, the warmth and softness of her skin against his again creating that same zing of awareness he'd felt earlier. "Thank you, but I don't see that happening, Miss Cates."

"I'm sure we can come to a meeting of the minds, not quite as literally as we did this time, I hope." Her full lips twitched and then rose into a playful grin. "Besides, I'm known to be very persuasive when I want something."

For some reason, Thomas believed her. "My schedule is pretty full."

"A half hour." Her fingers tightened around his. "What harm can I do in thirty minutes?"

Thomas cleared throat and released her hand. Seeing her again would be crazy. His mind was already made up. To him, dog therapy was nothing but … fluff. Still, the chance to spend time with this bewitching woman was something he couldn't make himself pass up.

No matter how much his logical side told him it wasn't a good idea.

"Okay, thirty minutes. You can call my secretary to set up a date and time. But be warned, I rarely change my mind."

Once a decision had been made, Thomas stuck by that decision. No matter what. It was something the hospital staff had learned about him in the two years he'd been here.

But agreeing to meet with Miss Cates?

Thomas had seriously reconsidered allowing the meeting to take place many times over the past week.

Thunder Canyon General wasn't a large facility, but thanks to the financial boom that came to town a few years back and the hard work of the hospital administrators—including his grandmother Ernestine North until she finally retired a year ago—the facility lacked for nothing.

Including a thriving gossip grapevine that, until recently, he'd never been a part of. An accomplishment Thomas had worked hard at since accepting his position.

He'd come home to Thunder Canyon determined not to make the same mistake twice. Oh, he knew the staff talked about him. Even after twenty-four months he was still considered the "new" guy around here.

His reputation as a skilled surgeon, and a success rate that was all the more impressive here at TC because of his age, followed him from his previous position at the UCLA Medical Center in Santa Monica.

Thank goodness that was the only thing that had followed.

He also knew some at Thunder Canyon General considered his bedside manner a bit … cold, at least to those who confused emotional involvement with professionalism.

A mistake he wouldn't make again.

But thanks to Annabel Cates and her dog he'd found himself the recipient of even more stares, whispered conversations that ended when he appeared and a few hazing incidents, some subtle and others not so much, starting the day after her visit.

The sweater Marge had worn the other day covered in miniature poodles had been a delicate jab, but the not-so-quiet barking his fellow surgeons and residents engaged in whenever he walked into the doctors' lounge was not.

The old-fashioned glass apothecary jar filled with dog biscuits and tied with a bright bow he'd found on his desk just the other day had been a nice touch. There'd been no card and Marge hadn't said a word about it. Deciding that leaving it in the break room for someone who actually had a pet would only add more fuel to the fire, he'd tucked the jar into the bottom drawer of his credenza.

All of which had to be the reason why Thomas found Annabel on his mind so much over the past several days. While he could admit, at least to himself, there'd been a spark of attraction, she was definitely not his type.

If he had one.

It'd been a while since he'd dated anyone. The women he'd gone out with in the past, when he found the time or desire, were professionals focused on their careers, much like him.

Of course, his last attempt at a serious relationship had dissolved into such a fiasco he ended up having no choice but to seek another job as far away from Southern California as he could get.

Which meant returning home to Thunder Canyon.

Besides, Annabel seemed … well, a bit flaky, idealistic, pushy. They could not be more opposite. Yet when he reviewed his calendar each morning he'd found himself looking for her name.

It wasn't until after Forrest Traub's surgery two days ago that it appeared with the promised thirty minutes blocked out for Thursday afternoon.

Today.

Annabel—and her dog—should be here any minute.

Not wanting a repeat from last time, Thomas sat behind his desk and tried to edit his latest article for a leading medical journal, but after reading the same paragraph three times he was glad when familiar tapping at the door came.

"Come in," he said, recognizing his secretary's signature knock. "Marge, I'm out of red markers. Could you find me a few more, please?"

"Sorry. I come bearing gifts, but not a red marker in sight."

Thomas looked up and found Annabel Cates standing in his doorway. He immediately noticed she wore her hair pulled back from her face in a ponytail. It made her look younger, though the curves presented in her simple bright yellow top and denim skirt said otherwise. He found himself wondering just how old she was.

He stood, his gaze drawn to her bare legs and toes, thanks to her sandals, this time the nails sporting a matching neon-yellow shade.

Details. Thomas was known for being a man of details, but he realized he'd taken in her entire outfit before he noticed the large, leafy green plant she held in her hands.

And the fact she was alone. No dog in sight.

"Don't tell me my secretary is baby—err, dog sitting."

She smiled and it lit up her entire face. Another detail he remembered from the last time she was in his office.

"Nope, it's just me this time. Disappointed?"

"Not in the least. Please, come in."

She did, closing the door behind her before she walked to his desk and held out the plant. "This is for you. It's a Peace Lily."

"Are we at war?"

"No, but I thought the name was fitting and this place needs a bit of color. Also, they're known for tolerance for low light, dry air and are great indoor air purifiers."

"Well, thank you." Surprised that she went to such lengths to pick out the offering, Thomas took the container, pausing when his fingers brushed over hers. He placed it on the filing cabinet next to his desk. "I can't promise I'll remember to water it."

"I kind of figured you were a busy guy, so I included an aqua globe. See?" She walked around the desk and moved in behind him, pointing out the green shaded globe barely visible among the leaves. Heat radiated off her body and he suddenly felt naked without his lab coat. "You just fill it, turn it upside down and jab it in the dirt. It'll water your plant for two weeks before you need to refill."

"Ah, that's … that's a good idea." Damn, he sounded like a schoolkid nervous to be talking to the prettiest girl in the class. "Why don't we sit down and get started?"

"Sounds great." Annabel stepped back but instead of taking one of the chairs in front of his desk, she moved to the couch against the wall. Skirting the coffee table, she dropped to one end and patted the spot next to her.

Thomas cleared his throat, but joined her, making sure to keep an empty space between them. Not that it mattered. Annabel simply scooted closer.

He fought against the automatic reaction to lean back and rest his arm against the back of the leather sofa. Instead, he scooted forward and braced his forearms on his knees, his hands clasped together.

"I left Smiley at home because I wanted to be able to talk without any furry distractions." She grabbed a large book from an oversize bag at her feet. "You don't have to feel bad or think you're not an animal person because the two of you didn't hit it off. You just haven't met the right one yet."

His shoulders went stiff. "I never said—"

"Most people love Smiley, which makes him so good at being a therapy dog," she continued, opening the book and laying it flat across her lap. "I started this scrapbook to document our training and all the work we do. There are a number of tests that Smiley had to pass before being certified, such as acceptance of a friendly stranger, walking through a crowd or sitting politely."

Thomas cleared his throat. It then closed up completely when Annabel laughed and reached out, giving his arm a gentle squeeze. "You're a special case."

Her heated touch seemed to sear his skin through the smooth material of his shirt. His fingers tightened against his knuckles until she released him. "Ah, that's good to know."

"Smiley was also tested for basic commands and how he reacted to being around other dogs, children and medical equipment and so on."

"I'm guessing all the animals in this program are required to provide health records?"

"Of course. They have to be tested annually and maintain a good appearance. Grooming is a must." She turned the page and pointed to certificates in both her and her dog's names. "We passed every test with flying colors and have been doing this kind of work for the last six months. I document every visit we make, sometimes with photographs, as we are working toward the American Kennel Club's Therapy Dog title. Smiley's been to schools, group homes, clinics and nursing care facilities. Not to mention a couple areas here at TC General."

Annabel gently brushed her fingertips over the pictures on the next page of a young girl lying in a hospital bed, her head covered in a colorful head scarf and Smiley stretched out beside her. "This

is Isabella. She was the sweetest thing. When we arrived to visit with her she asked me if Smiley was an angel. When I asked why, she said she'd just dreamed that an angel was coming to take her home."

Thomas watched as Annabel paused, pressing her fingertips to her lips, and glanced upward for a moment before she went on. "Her mother told Isabella she was too sick to leave the hospital just yet and the little girl said she wasn't talking about their home. That the angel was taking her to God's house. She died six weeks later, just days after her tenth birthday. That last week Smiley and I were there every day."

He had to ask. "Why do you do that?"

She looked at him, her blue eyes shiny. "Do what?"

"Roll your eyes that way. You did it during the appointment with Forrest when I was discussing his surgery and again just now."

"I wasn't rolling my eyes. Not in the traditional sense."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'm not bored or exasperated. You see, I tend to get a bit emotional, especially in some of the situations Smiley and I find ourselves involved with. It's a trick I picked up from another dog handler to stop the tears."

"It works?"

Annabel nodded. "My mom told me that tickling the roof of my mouth with the tip of my tongue will do the same thing, but I'm usually too busy talking—" She stopped and bit down on her bottom lip. "Well, I guess you've already figured that out."

Yes, he had. What he couldn't figure out was why he liked that about her.

"Should I go on?" she asked.

As if he could tell her not to. "Please do."

Annabel turned the page and his gaze was drawn to the photo of a teenage boy holding himself upright on parallel bars, a prosthetic where his right leg should have been. "This is Marcus Colton. He lost his leg last winter in a snowmobile accident. Like most teenagers, what he did best was give his physical therapists a hard time."

"Let me guess. Smiley changed that?"

"We were at the clinic one day when Marcus was being his usual charming self, demanding no one would get him to make a fool of himself by trying to walk, even though he'd been doing pretty well at his rehab for a month by then."

She pointed to the next picture showing her dog sitting calmly at the opposite end of the bars, Annabel just a few feet away holding his leash. "Smiley allowed Marcus to pet him for a few minutes and then he went and sat there, almost daring Marcus to come to him."

"And he did."

"Not the first visit. Or even the second, but Smiley proved to be every bit as stubborn as Marcus. The boy finally relented and now he's making great progress."

She went on, telling him stories of senior citizens who had no one to visit them but Smiley, of the patients attending their dialysis sessions who welcomed the distraction petting a dog brought and schoolkids finding it easier to practice their reading when their audience was a dog.

With each story came more looks upward, a couple swipes at the tears that made it through and a sexy husky laugh, all of which struck a chord deep in Thomas's gut.

"I'm guessing all of this is to convince me to allow Smiley to work with Forrest during his rehab, if my patient agrees," Thomas said when she finally finished. "But why do I get the feeling you are looking for something else from me?"

"Hmm, now that's a loaded question." She closed her book, a pretty blush on her cheeks. "Yes, working with Forrest was my original plan. I still want to now that he's home from the hospital and ready to start his physical therapy, but what I'd really like is to set up a weekly support group here at the hospital. One that's open to any patient who wants to come, no matter what their illness."

While Thomas still had doubts about her work, he found himself enamored of Annabel's spirit. What surprised him even more was the fact he wanted to see her again.

And not just here at the hospital.

"I'm still not completely convinced, but I'll agree to at least consider your idea."

"Really?" Annabel's smile was wide, her blue eyes sparkling up at him. "That's wonderful!"

"There's just one condition." He could hardly believe the words pouring from his mouth. "You agree to have dinner with me."

Chapter Three

Stunned, Annabel didn't know what to say. Anyone who knew her well would say it was the first time she'd ever been at a loss for words.

Especially after she'd spent the past half hour hogging the conversation with a man who'd put those dreamy and steamy television doctors to shame. Without the standard long white lab coat he'd worn the last time she was here, his purple dress shirt and purple, gray and black striped tie brought out just a hint of lavender in those amazingly blue eyes.

Not to mention what the shirt did for the man's broad shoulders.

He wore his dark hair short, but it stood up in spiky tufts on top, as if he'd been running his hand through it just before she arrived. The sharp angles of his cheeks and jaw were smooth-shaven despite it being late in the afternoon.

Her breath had just about vanished from her lungs when he'd joined her on the couch, his woodsy cologne teasing her senses. Thank goodness she'd remembered the scrapbook so she had something to do with her hands.

Besides attack the good doctor, that was.

"Annabel? Did you hear me?"

She blinked, realized she'd been staring. "You want to go out?"

"Yes."

Considering how hard she'd tried not to sound like a sap with her endless chatter about the therapy dog program, Annabel now found it hard to put her thoughts into words. "With me?"

"Yes, with you. We can talk more about your program. Unless there's a reason why you can't?"

Was "too stunned to reply" an acceptable answer?

"Do you have a boyfriend?" His expression turned serious again. "I didn't see a ring on your finger, but I don't want to presume you are free—"

"No." She cut him off. He'd actually looked to see if she wore a ring? "I'm free, totally free. Free as a bird."

"Is that a yes, then?"

She nodded. "Yes, dinner sounds great."

"Tomorrow night okay?"

Something to do on a Friday that didn't include her dog or a sibling? Tomorrow night would be perfect. "I work until six, but after that I'm all yours."

Thomas cleared his throat and stood, rising to his feet in one smooth motion. "Where do you work?"

"At the Thunder Canyon Public Library." Annabel mirrored his actions, grabbing her bag and slipping it over one shoulder. "I'm the librarian in charge of the children's area."

He waved a hand at her scrapbook. "So, all the work you do with therapy dogs is strictly volunteer?"

"Oh, yes. I don't get paid for any of my visits, other than Smiley sometimes getting a doggy treat or two." She hugged her book to her chest, peeking up at him through her lashes. "But I love the work. The therapy program is one of my many passions, along with books and my family. I guess I'm just a passionate person by nature."

His eyes deepened to a dark blue as their focus shifted to her mouth. A slight tilt of his head, a restrained shift in his body that brought him just a hint closer.

Her tongue darted out to lick her suddenly dry lips. She couldn't help it. Not that she dared think he might—

Yes, she had thought about the man, probably too much, over the past two weeks. She'd been looking forward to this meeting for more reasons than convincing Thomas to allow a therapy group here at the hospital. One she would be in charge of.

Annabel could admit, at least to herself, she'd wanted to find out if the quivering sensations she'd experienced when they'd first met had been all in her head.

They weren't.

"I know a great Italian bistro, Antonio's, over in Bozeman. Where should I pick you up?"

She blinked again, breaking the spell the doctor seemed to weave around her. Antonio's? A dinner there cost more than she made in a week. "Oh, we don't have to go that far. Any place in town would be fine by me."

"My treat, so I get to pick the place."

His tone was persuasively charming, so Annabel simply rattled off her address. And her cell phone number. "You know, just in case."

Thomas nodded, then gestured in the direction of the door with one hand, signaling the end of their meeting. "Until tomorrow night, then."

Annabel stepped in front of him, sure she could feel the heat of his gaze on her backside as he followed her. She turned when she reached the door, but found those blue eyes squarely focused on her face.

"I'll pick you up around seven?" he asked.

She smiled. "I'll be waiting."

She waited.

And waited and waited.

Palming her cell phone, Annabel paced the length of her bedroom, her bare toes scrunching in the soft carpet. Smiley lay at the end of her bed, watching her stride back and forth like he was a spectator at a tennis match.

She'd changed out of the sundress with its matching knitted shrug and into a cropped T-shirt and yoga pants an hour ago, kicking her cute kitten heels back into the bottom of her closet.

After she'd accepted the fact Thomas had stood her up.

She'd really been looking forward to tonight. Yes, the chance to talk more about her idea of a weekly therapy session with Smiley at the hospital was a big draw, but darn it, getting to know Thomas better appealed to her even more.

"It's after nine thirty," Annabel said softly, eyeing the clock on her bedside table. "Why hasn't he called?"

Smiley offered a sympathetic whimper and lowered his head to his paws until a quick knock at her bedroom door grabbed his attention.

Seconds later, her sister popped her head in. "Hey! We're about to start a Mr. Darcy movie marathon now that Dad has gone off to bed. You coming downstairs?"

Annabel gave Jordyn Leigh a forced smile, knowing the "we" she was referring to was herself, their older sister, Jazzy, and their mother, all of whom shared a deep affection for the beloved Jane Austen literary character.

As did she.

"I don't think so," she said. Not even Colin Firth's portrayal of the dashing hero could lift her disappointment—or erase the tiny flicker of hope she still held.

"You know, Mom said she can't believe the three single Cates sisters are all home on a Friday night." Jordyn Leigh nudged the door wider and leaned against the frame. "Of course, you taking a pass on dinner tonight had us all thinking you had other plans."

"I did."

Her sister eyed her outfit. "Dressed like that?"

Annabel sighed and glanced at her phone again. “I decided to change after he didn’t show. Almost three hours ago.”

“Yikes. Hoping for the old ‘if I get into my sweats the jerk will call’ effect, huh?”

“He’s not a jerk.” Her defense of him came easily, even if she had no idea why.

Her sister frowned, but only said, “Why don’t *you* call *him?*”

Annabel had thought about it, but the only number she had for Thomas was his office. The last thing she wanted was to leave a pathetic voice mail for him to find first thing Monday morning.

“I don’t have his number,” she finally said. “He’s got mine, at least I’m assuming he does. I mean, I gave it to him, but—”

“But he didn’t write it down or put it in his phone right away?” Jordyn guessed. “So you’re thinking he forgot?”

Her number? Their plans? All about her?

Annabel didn’t know what to think.

“Well, you know where we’ll be if you decide to join us. Mom’s insisting we start with the black and white version of *Pride and Prejudice* featuring Sir Laurence, so you have plenty of time before our favorite Mr. Darcy appears.”

With that, her sister vanished and Annabel flopped down on her bed, immediately bestowed with a sloppy kiss from Smiley, who’d crawled next to her.

“Oh, buddy, what am I going to do?” She scratched at her dog’s ears. “Maybe I should go back to work. Goodness knows I got zero done this afternoon thinking about tonight. Or do I stay up here and drive myself crazy wondering why—”

An odd chiming filled the air. It took a moment before Annabel realized it was coming from her cell phone. Not her usual ringtone that asked a cowboy to take her away.

She sat up and read the display. Caller unknown. Her fingers tightened around her phone. One deep breath and she pressed the answer button. “Hello?”

“Annabel? It’s Thomas.”

“Oh.” She paused. “Hi there.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be a no-show tonight.”

She released the air from her lungs, while the ache in her stomach that she’d insisted was due to lack of food eased. “Did you get lost?”

“I never left the hospital.” His voice was low and a bit husky. “I was called into an emergency surgery this afternoon and didn’t have time to try to get ahold of you. I didn’t expect it to take this long, but there were complications.”

Stuck at work. She’d never even considered that. “Was the surgery a success?”

“Yes, it was.” He sounded surprised. “Thanks for asking.”

“Are you still at the hospital?”

“Sitting in the men’s locker room. I called as soon as I got out of the shower.”

Trying not to picture Thomas standing in front of a locker dripping wet and wearing nothing but a towel was as impossible as stopping Smiley from hogging the bed at night.

So she didn’t even try.

“You must be exhausted,” she said. “I can hear it in your voice.”

“I am, but it’s a good fatigue, sort of like a runner’s high after completing a marathon. I feel like I could run ten miles.” He sighed. “Not really, but that’s the only comparison I can think of.”

An idea popped into Annabel’s head, so crazy it just might work. “So, I’m guessing you didn’t have a chance to eat dinner either?”

“I’ll probably grab a burger at a drive-thru on my way home—wait, did you say ‘either’?”

“How about meeting me at The Hitching Post? Say in about twenty minutes?”

“The what?”

“The Hitching Post. It’s on Main Street in Old Town. You know the place, right?”

Silence filled the air. Annabel crossed her fingers. On both hands.

"Ah, yeah … I mean, yes," Thomas finally said. "I know where it is."

Annabel jumped up and began rifling through her closet. "Great! I'll see you there!"

Thomas slowed his silver BMW to a full stop at the curb, surprised to find an empty parking space so close to The Hitching Post on a Friday night.

He'd never been here before, but he'd heard his coworkers rave about the local hangout. Once owned by a lady with a questionable past, the place was now a restaurant and bar, a modern-day saloon right in the middle of Thunder Canyon's Old Town, an area that proudly retained its Western heritage.

A section of town Thomas rarely spent time in. Then again, he rarely spent time anywhere other than his condo or the hospital.

Stepping out of his car, he thumbed the button to lock the doors and set the alarm, then headed for the sidewalk.

He hated to admit it, but his plan had been to take Annabel someplace outside of Thunder Canyon where the walls didn't have ears and the gossip didn't travel at the speed of light.

Things at the hospital were finally quieting down, but to be seen together here tonight … Who knew what kind of rumors would fly?

Asking her out in the first place had been crazy enough. Agreeing to meet her here? That he blamed squarely on the fact she'd surprised him by not being angry at being stood up.

And the fact he wanted to see her again as soon as possible.

He started for the front door then realized the place was completely dark.

Geez, how late was it?

He glanced at his watch and then noticed the sign stuck in the front window. Closed for Renovation. What the heck was going on—

"Hey there!"

He turned and found Annabel standing on the corner, cradling two large paper bags in her arms. She was dressed casually in jeans and a distressed leather jacket, her hair in loose golden waves.

Thomas again felt that familiar zing at the sight of her. "Hey, yourself. Looks like this place is shut down."

"Oh, I knew it was closed. At least temporarily. My uncle Frank and my cousin Matt have been overseeing the renovation for Jason Traub and his new wife, Joss, who are the new owners. I only named it as a meeting place."

Meeting place for what? He must be more tired that he thought. "What's with the paper sacks?"

"Dinner!" Annabel beamed. "A care package chock-full of ribs, chicken and steak fries from DJ's Rib Shack. Come on, I've got the perfect place for us to eat."

He joined her, not knowing what smelled better, the food or that sexy floral scent he'd noticed the first time they met.

"Here, let me take those," he offered.

Annabel handed over one of her parcels. The heat from the cooked food warmed his hands. They headed up the street and Thomas was curious as to where they were going. His first thought had been her place, but she'd given him an address that was on the southeast side of town.

At the end of the next block she crossed the street and walked toward a large two-story stone building.

"The Thunder Canyon Library?" He read the sign as they walked past the front steps. "We're eating here?"

"My second favorite place in town."

"Pardon my ignorance, but isn't it closed, too?"

"Don't worry. I have a key." Annabel smiled and led him around the corner to a tall wooden fence. He followed her directions to open the gate. "Latch that behind us, okay?"

Thomas did as she asked and they entered a shadowed courtyard. Thanks to a full moon, he could see a grassy area to one side with trees and benches and a wooden jungle gym on the other. Straight ahead was a wall of glass doors covered with blinds.

"This is the back way into the children's section. Don't worry, a security light should come on —" A bright spotlight shined down on them, illuminating the area. "And there it is. Come on, this way."

Annabel punched a code into a hidden keypad and pushed open the closest door. She held the blinds to one side and Thomas followed her, watching as she then did the same thing with another keypad on an inside wall. "The outside light will go off in a few minutes."

"Are you sure it's okay for us to be here?"

"What's the matter, doc?" She turned, that same saucy smile on her face. "Haven't you ever broken a few rules?"

Yeah, an unwritten one about dating a coworker's ex-wife.

Not good, especially when he found out the lady hadn't yet told her husband she'd filed for divorce. The fact that the man had been a senior surgeon while Thomas was fresh out of his residency only added to the mess.

"It's not something I make a habit of."

"Well, you're not doing it now, either. This is my domain, remember? I'm allowed to be here anytime I want and I often work after hours." Annabel hit a light switch, bathing the large room in a soft glow. "Ah, almost like candlelight. No need to go with all the lights just for dinner."

It wasn't the intimate setting like a private corner booth at Antonio's, but Thomas had to admit it was close.

"This used to be a storage area before I took it over three years ago," Annabel continued. "I had the place completely gutted and rebuilt from the ground up, including the wall of glass to the outside area. Now the kids have a place to come where they don't have to be quiet like upstairs. Well, not as quiet."

Thomas looked around, taking in the floor-to-ceiling bookcases, the scattered tables and chairs, most sized for patrons under four feet tall, as well as several large pillows, comfy armchairs and knit rugs covered hardwood floors.

Posters of children's authors and book covers decorated the walls. A curved wooden desk that must be original to the building stood against one wall, and above it hung a framed headshot of a grinning golden retriever that had to be Annabel's dog, with a placard that read Honorary Mascot.

"Come on, grab a piece of floor."

He turned to find Annabel kneeling at a child-size table, removing a couple of water bottles from the paper bag. She paused to peel off her jacket, revealing a faded Johnny Cash 1967 concert T-shirt that hugged her curves in all the right places.

Thomas had to swallow the lump in his throat before he asked, "You plan on eating right here?"

"Of course." She pushed aside a couple of miniature chairs and grabbed two large character-decorated pillows. "Here, you can have Dr. Seuss, in honor of your profession. I'll take Winnie-the-Pooh."

Shaking his head, he joined her on the carpet, their hips bumping as they worked to empty the bags of their dinner. Thomas edged away, determined to keep this night light and easy. "So, how did you become a librarian?"

"Freshman-year biology."

That got his attention. "Excuse me?"

Annabel opened one of the containers and the spicy tang of barbecue filled the air. "As a kid I was always the one bringing home stray cats or injured birds. I even stole a horse from a rancher who was using inhumane training techniques on the poor animal. My family thought I'd grow up to

be a veterinarian or maybe even a doctor. But when I got to high school and was told I had to dissect a defenseless little frog …" Her voice trailed off as she shuddered. "I just couldn't do it."

Thomas grinned. "You do know the frog was already dead, right?"

"Yes, I knew that, but I still didn't understand why we couldn't learn what we needed without killing … cutting—anyway, I organized a protest which pretty much ended my science career. So I got my bachelor's degree in English from San Jose State University, stayed on to get my master's in Library Sciences and here I am."

He was surprised to hear she'd gone to school out of state. "You went to college in California?"

"With the size of my family a full scholarship made it an easy decision." Annabel filled two plates with ribs, chicken and fries. "I loved it. The bay area is so beautiful."

"And yet you came back here afterward?"

"Of course, Thunder Canyon is my home." She pushed a plate in his direction. "This smells heavenly! Let's eat!"

It was a far cry from the refined dinner he'd originally envisioned, but the food was terrific. They ate picnic style with Thomas trying his best to work with the plastic silverware and keep his meal out of his lap.

"You know, messy is the only way to go." Annabel took a barbecued chicken leg in her fingers and attacked it with a large bite. "Mmm, so good."

Thomas smiled. Her lack of pretense impressed him. Most of the women he'd dated seemed to refrain from eating altogether. Annabel approached her meal the same way she approached the rest of her life—with gusto.

Messy gusto.

"And you do know the caveman method to dining will always result in more sauce on your face and hands than in your mouth, right?" Thomas asked, then smiled even wider at the exaggerated indignation on her face. "You've got a large dollop on your cheek."

His breath caught the moment her tongue snaked out, trying to capture the evidence. It should look comical, but Thomas was captivated. "Ah, other side."

She repeated the motion, but still missed.

"Here, let me help …"

He leaned closer, brushing at the side of her mouth with his thumb the same moment Annabel tried again, and was stunned when the quick lick against his skin sent shock waves through his body.

Her blue eyes widened and he couldn't stop himself from dragging the moist digit over her full bottom lip.

Three dates in the past two years, longer than that since he'd even wanted to feel a woman's mouth beneath his, but right here, right now, there was nothing Thomas wanted more in the world than to kiss Annabel.

And damn the consequences.

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