



GRIFF MONTGOMERY
Quarterback

*Has Griff found the woman of his dreams in Lauren?
Will she deny her love and hide the truth to avoid facing another tragedy?*

Jean C. Joachim

First & Ten Series

GRIFF MONTGOMERY, QUARTERBACK

First & Ten Series, 1

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Moonlight Books

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A Moonlight Books Novel

Sensual Romance

Griff Montgomery, Quarterback

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Dedication

To Rick Regan

A great football fan, news editor, and special friend. He supported my writing with kind words of encouragement every time we met. We miss you. Gone so soon, way before your time.

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TUFFER'S CHRISTMAS WISH

GRIFF MONTGOMERY, QUARTERBACK

First & Ten Series

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Chapter One

Griff picked up the last dinner plate and drew back his arm to hurl it against the wall when the doorbell interrupted him. It was the police. Two officers stood on his front step.

“Mr. Montgomery. We had a complaint about noise coming from here. Caller said it sounded like a fight.” The policeman looked apologetic. “Your family still here?”

“They moved to California two days ago.”

“Mind telling us what’s going on?” The cop shifted his weight, clearly uncomfortable.

“I dropped a stack of dishes. Made a huge mess, too. Would you like to come in, officer?”

Griff stepped away from the door.

“No, sir. I’ll take your word for it. Would you mind signing an autograph for my boy, Billy?”

“Not at all.” Griff wrote on the paper the policeman provided. Then he smiled as the two men tipped their caps and returned to their squad car.

Pays to be a celebrity in a small town. He remained on the stoop, peering at the neighboring houses. He figured the sound must have carried. Folks would be home at four o’clock on a Saturday, too, out gardening and mowing the lawns. They would have seen his sister, her two kids, and her new husband drive away. *Hell, you couldn’t miss the moving van. Damn thing carried away half my house.*

So, what had the neighbors pushing their noses into his business? *Can’t a guy let off a little steam his own way in his own house?* Anger bubbled up again in his chest.

He had one more plate left, but now, he had no excuse for the crash. If the police returned, they wouldn't believe his bullshit story a second time. He returned to the kitchen and cringed when he saw the size of the mess he'd made. Sharp pieces of china in all sizes scattered across the floor and into the dining room. He'd even managed to nick the paint on the wall in several places. And he was the only one there to clean it up.

He hated cleaning, a job his sister, Kathy, had taken on when she was living there. *Fuckin' A, Kathy. Why aren't you here?*

In his heart, Griff knew that he wasn't mourning the defection of his sister to Los Angeles. Sure, they were close, but he was glad she'd found Wes, her new spouse. It had been ten years since her first, Dan, had died in a fire in his office building. He'd left Kathy with two young children. She had needed a husband. Even with his helping out, Griff couldn't fill that role. His biggest gripe was the children, who had become like his own. He missed them.

When he was twenty-three, he'd moved in to help his sister. It was supposed to be temporary. The kids were little, Joey was five, and Missy, three. The grandparents were too old, they said, to take on the responsibility of such young children. So Griff had become their new father figure.

At first, he had been uncomfortable. He didn't know how to care for little kids. But the children hadn't known that. They'd loved him right away. It wasn't long before Griff had become a true family man, going to parent/teacher conferences with Kathy and reading bedtime stories. Joey and Missy were sweet and charming, like his big sister. He couldn't help returning their affection.

It had been the least he could do for the woman who'd helped raise him. Kathy was seven years older than Griff. A menopause surprise baby, she always teased. She had been there to shepherd him through the ins and outs of life when his parents had been too tired or preoccupied to find the time. He owed her, he'd figured. And this had been the perfect payback.

Griff made a boatload of money as the star quarterback for the Connecticut Kings. He paid the bills, and Kathy had signed over the house to him in return. At thirty-three, he was ready to think ahead to retirement, and increased family time, but his had flown the coop. Now, he was left alone with a big home and no kids. His life, brimming over with activity for ten years, had ground to a halt.

No more soccer games, little league tournaments, or scout troop overnights. No more camping out or playing catch in the yard. No board games on Saturday nights. No trips to Frosty Freeze for ice cream. No birthday parties. No kids' movies with popcorn and soda.

He was not a happy man.

Griff pulled out the broom, but had to hunt for the dustpan. After several curses, he located it under the sink. *Who puts a fuckin' dustpan under the sink? It can get wet under there.* Sweeping took time. He was careful, not relishing the idea of ending up with tiny shards of glass in his foot. When he finished, he returned the dustpan to its home, frustrated he couldn't find a better spot.

Then came going over the floor with a wet paper towel to pick up the bits too small to see. When he was finished, he ripped off his now-sweaty T-shirt and hopped in the shower. Even the refreshing water on his body couldn't remove the thoughts from his head. His ready-made family, his neat, cozy, compartmentalized life was over. How could he fill the empty space in his heart?

Sure, he still had his women. A girl in every major city shared his bed on road trips. And his local bed-buddy, Carla, the bartender at The Savage Beast, was still here. Griff took an occasional night at The Savage. Betty, a retired Broadway star, played piano and sang on Friday and Saturday nights. He enjoyed her music and the convivial atmosphere.

Maybe Carla's ready to make it permanent with me. The sex is good. I'm sure we can find other common interests besides The Savage Martini, playing pool, and singing along with Betty.

Stuffing his frustration down inside, Griff dressed in his casual best for a Saturday night at The Savage and his plan to get closer to Carla. After sliding his long legs into new jeans and pulling on a light blue T-shirt that hugged his muscles, he combed his mahogany-brown hair. He wore it slightly long, shaggy around the ears, at Kathy's suggestion. His smile was dazzling, and his dark eyes, sexy.

He plucked the keys to his silver Jaguar XK convertible off the dresser and roared into downtown Monroe, the small town that was home to The Kings.

* * * *

In an old Victorian house across town, Lauren Farraday lugged a suitcase to her small car. Her newly ex-husband, Bob Decker, stood on the front porch, watching.

"That's a big suitcase for a couple of days."

"I don't know how long I'm going to be there," Lauren said, taking the steps one at a time.

“Linda doesn’t want the dishes, so I’m leaving them for you.”

“Good.” She returned to the porch, plopped down on the loveseat, and took a sip of iced tea.

“But she does want the vacuum. I thought that was a fair trade.” He took a slug of beer from a can.

“Whatever.”

“I want to be fair.”

“I don’t care.” She struggled to keep anger out of her voice.

“But I do. I don’t want you to feel dumped or anything.” He shifted his weight.

“I don’t,” she lied.

“Fine. You know we only got married because of...that and so, I mean, it’s only fair—”

“Shut up, Bob. I get it. I didn’t argue with you about the divorce. I didn’t fight you for stuff. Let it be, okay? It is what it is. I’ve accepted that.”

“It’s not like you were madly in love with me.”

She sat up. “Don’t go there.”

“I mean, just saying—”

“I know exactly what you’re saying. We’ve said it a thousand times in the last three months. Can you please let it go already?” She crossed then uncrossed her legs.

“Okay. As long as you’re all right.”

“I’m fine.”

“Sure got over me fast,” he mumbled.

“You can’t have it both ways, Bob. Me crying my eyes out over losing you and then being cool when we split up. Make up your mind.” Her brows knitted, as a note of irritation crept into her words.

“You’re right. I feel a little... Well, I left a few extra thousand in the savings, in case you need it.”

“Thanks.” *Guilty, maybe? Damn straight, you feel guilty. Bastard.*

“Linda and I’ll be shoving off in the morning.”

“Here’s a list of things you need to do before you go,” Lauren said, pulling a piece of paper from her pocket.

Bob glanced at it then balled it up. “Honestly, Lauren. Don’t be insulting. I know how to close up the house.”

“There’s more on there.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“I hope you and Linda’ll be very happy.”

“I bet you do.”

Lauren couldn’t ignore his snide tone. “Trying to be civil here. At least it’s not like you’re leaving me for someone new.”

“That would be worse?”

“In a funny way, yeah. It would.” She took a gulp to moisten her throat.

“Guess there’s nothing left to say except...good luck.” He opened the screen door and went inside.

Lauren let out a breath. The barking of a small dog caught her attention. A pug slipped out the front, circled her legs, and jumped up. “Zander,” she whispered, bending down so the canine could lick her face. She smiled and muttered affectionate words to the enthusiastic pooch.

“Where the hell is that mutt?” Bob shouted.

“Out here. And he’s not a mutt,” Lauren said.

Bob joined her and fastened a harness and leash on the panting dog. “Little monster won’t stay inside.”

“He likes to ride in the car with me.”

“So take him to Rhode Island.”

“He’s not allowed in the hospital, Bob. Please close the door. I’ll be leaving in a minute, and he’ll be fine.”

Bob dragged Zander, straining at the lead to stay with his mistress, away and slammed the door behind him. She jumped at the loud sound and swore under her breath.

Time to get on the road. She pushed to her feet and picked up her cell. There was a missed call from her brother. She dialed.

“Don? I’m getting in the car now.”

“What time will you get here?” Her brother’s voice sounded edgy.

“Hmm, four thirty, now. Tell Dad I’ll be there by dinnertime.”

“Need directions?”

“What? No. I’ve been to the hospital plenty of times.”

“I hate hospitals.”

“Yeah. I know. Me, too.”

“Dad’s asking for you.”

“I’m on my way. I’ll be there in a little over two hours. Did you tell mom?”

“She’s in the Caribbean with her flavor of the month.”

“Nothing you can do, then. See you soon. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

She took a deep breath and got behind the wheel. The moving truck was parked at the curb, awaiting her departure so that it could take over the driveway. She grabbed one last look at the house and spied Bob carrying luggage. She sighed as a shudder passed through her. Her eyes watered. *What am I getting sentimental for? I can’t wait to be rid of that bastard.*

For a split second, the image of what might have been in this wonderful old house danced before her eyes. Her vision, her dream of a loving husband and two kids, vanished like mist under a hot sun. A quick shake of her head returned her to reality. *Can’t change the past. Lose the dream and move on. Dad needs you.*

Lauren put the car in gear and headed toward the highway that would take her to Providence and the bedside of her ailing father.

* * * *

Griff Montgomery stopped on Elm Street in front of The Savage Beast. The sign said “Open.” Creaky hinges announced his arrival as he entered his favorite watering hole. Carla was behind the bar, setting up.

“Not open yet,” she called out.

“Sign says you are.”

“Griff?” She looked up. “Come on in.” She beamed a thousand watt smile at him.

He looked her over with appreciation. *Carla’s got it all. Amazing body. Great personality.* Her long, black hair swung down to cover her ample cleavage. She tossed it back with a snap of her head. His gaze rested on her breasts as the memory of their last tryst in her apartment upstairs lingered in his mind.

“You’re early.”

He preferred not to explain that he had no reason to be at home. “Got anything special today?”

“Yeah, Roddy’s new drink, the Savage Sunrise.”

Griff lifted an eyebrow. “What’s in it?”

“Same as a Tequila Sunrise, only papaya juice instead of orange. He says it’s healthier. I think it’s bullshit.”

Griff laughed. “Now I have to try it. Bring it on.”

She peeked at him as she mixed the drink. “Got a lot of free time nowadays?”

“You might say that,” he replied, avoiding the question, staring at the suggestive painting behind the bar.

She placed the glass in front of him. “When are you gonna fix me up with one of your hot teammates?”

“What’s wrong with me?” He took a sip and gave her a thumbs up.

“We’ve been bed buddies long enough to know it’s not happening beyond that.”

He seated his tall, rangy body on a stool. “Don’t know ’till you try.”

She wiped her hands on a towel and fixed him with a stare. “You gonna stop running around, whoring across the country and back, just for little ole me?”

“Whoring? Wait a minute...”

“That’s what I thought.” She turned her attention to a dozen wet wine glasses.

“Give me a chance, Carla.”

“To break my heart? No way. Besides, I’d hate to ruin a good friendship.” She dried some of the stemware.

He shot her a one-sided grin. “I knew you were gonna say that.”

“Burger tonight?” She raised an eyebrow.

“With blue cheese, please.”

“I know. Well done. Coming up.” She disappeared into the kitchen.

Griff looked around. He was usually at the bar after dark, when the kids were in bed or at least busy with homework. During the day, it looked different. The soft lights at night gave the wood a rich patina that faded under the harsh, afternoon sunlight. The floor looked like it needed refinishing. The barstools needed repainting. But at night, everything looked better, finer, and the atmosphere was warm and friendly.

Carla brought out his burger and poured herself a Coke. “Family took off for the West Coast?”

“They did.” He took a big bite. *No one makes a blue cheese burger like Carla.* “This is great, as always.”

She smiled at him. “So, now you’re looking to settle down?”

“I guess.”

“I don’t want a traveling man.”

“One big injury and my career’s over, Carla. Time to put down roots.”

“Yeah? Tell me you don’t have a girl in every port, sailor.” She chuckled.

Griff blushed. *Might have to get rid of them if I’m gonna do this.*

“That’s what I thought,” she said, wiping the bar down with a wet rag.

“What about my teammates? They’re no different.”

“Oh? You telling me they’re all man-whores like you?”

“Maybe not all, but most.”

“Damn. Then bring in the few who aren’t. Let me look them over.”

He laughed. “Kinda like a cattle call?”

“More like a...a...beauty pageant.”

Conversation slowed down and ended completely in an hour when a crowd began to form. The Friday after-work folks stopping for a quick cold one before home blended with the single people who came by for a drink, dinner, and some companionship. Some made connections for the night, some only came to eat, drink, and sing.

Griff knew the regulars. He’d hung out here when Kathy and the kids had lived with him because he didn’t feel right bringing women back to the house. It was a comfortable place where he was accepted and not bothered too much for being well known. Tonight, though, it took on a different feel. No matter what happened at The Savage Beast, he wouldn’t be going home to his family.

Carla was right. They couldn’t turn a casual sexual relationship into a marriage. Still, Griff remembered the soft feel of her flesh and the raucous laughter they’d shared. But he wouldn’t want his wife working in a bar, and Carla wouldn’t want him telling her what to do.

And he wanted someone who wanted kids. Had to have kids. They were an absolute, non-negotiable part of the equation. He’d had so much practice that being a dad for real should be a piece of cake.

He chuckled to himself, knowing fatherhood was never simple, even with practice. Then, he remembered Carla making a face whenever he’d mentioned his niece and nephew. *“Spoil this body to produce another fucked up human being? No way.”* Nope, Carla was not in the running.

After two more Savage Sunrises, Griff left her a generous tip, slipped off the stool, and drove home, alone, for an evening of unbearable quiet and inane television.

* * * *

Griff rose with the sun, even on Sunday. He had coffee and read the paper on the back deck, overlooking his tranquil swimming pool. He wore a wife-beater tank top and shorts, as he was planning to run a couple of miles then work out in the gym at the stadium. He needed to keep in shape, and the exercise helped ease his loneliness.

In the past, these few weeks after school ended and before training camp began at the end of July had been golden. Griff and Kathy had shared family vacations. Griff had taken his sister and her kids to Disney, of course, but then on more sophisticated trips. One year they had gone to the Galapagos, another to the Baseball Hall of Fame, and then the Maine coast. This year, now that the children were older, he had planned to take them to London, Paris, and Rome. But the plans had gone up in smoke when Kathy had announced her move to San Francisco.

He was restless with too much time on his hands. So, he arrived at the stadium by eight o'clock. Pete Sebastian, or Coach Bass, as he was known to the team, was already in his office. Griff chuckled to himself and waved as he passed the glass wall. Since the Coach's kids had gone off to college, he rattled around his big, empty house, too. Griff expected him to show up at The Savage Beast any Saturday night now.

He met up with his best friend, Elroy "Buddy" Carruthers, in the gym. Fast and smart, Buddy was Griff's wide receiver. Shorter than Griff by a couple of inches, Buddy was lean and hard. He was on the treadmill and gave Griff a wave.

Griff went to the small weights and began pumping iron to strengthen his arms. Buddy was drenched in sweat, indicating he'd been on the machine for a while. After fifteen minutes, both men took a break.

Unmarried, Buddy tied for the worst reputation as a man-whore with Devon Drake, a cornerback. The two men were always on the lookout for new women, often taking single rookies along on their quests. Buddy swore he'd never take a married player out to get laid on the road. Griff had laughed when his friend had made that pronouncement and called him "a man-whore with principles."

Griff had brought Buddy home to dinner with his family often. They'd had touch football games in the backyard with the kids and their friends. He'd noticed how relaxed and comfortable his teammate was with Kathy and her children and wondered why Buddy wasn't married. But Griff never pushed. Buddy didn't talk much about his past, college days, or anything personal. Griff wondered if his friend had been such a big seducer back then, too.

Whenever he asked, Buddy would make a joke and avoid the question. Finally, Griff took the hint and stopped asking.

At one point, he'd thought Buddy might be interested in Kathy. Griff had made it clear that he was not an acceptable date for her. Buddy had backed off, saying, "Hey, if I had a sister, I wouldn't want her dating a guy like me, either."

The two men prowled bars together on the road. Tempting young women were never in short supply. Occasionally, they would zero in on the same girl. Then they would make a silent bet as to who would win her. From time to time, their target would leave the bar by herself and the men would shrug, laugh and go to bed early, alone. Buddy never drank nectar from the same flower twice and appeared content with his life choices.

When Griff hit bumpy roads with his niece and nephew, he'd go to Coach Bass for advice. Coach always made time for his star quarterback. Times like those, the team became extended family for Griff.

His life had been perfect. Now, it was shattered like a glass breaking into smithereens after landing on a stone floor. What's more, he wasn't sure where to go to patch it back together.

Coach suggested renovating his house. With the family gone, Griff bounced around like the last pea in a pod. He hired an architect, who made drawings and suggestions, like a gigantic bedroom suite for him with a new, lavish bathroom. She recommended tearing down walls and redesigning everything—including a complete renovation of the kitchen. The house wasn't old and wasn't new. It was nondescript, but functional. Her ideas enticed him.

The entire project would cost about two hundred grand. But when he was done, it would be a palace. He signed the papers, made the first payment, and looked for a place to live until the place was ready.

Chapter Two

Griff pulled up and parked his car on the street next to the small, Victorian house. Kids were playing kickball in a yard next door. He could hear them yelling and the sound of the soft ball being whacked. He'd played kickball with Kathy's kids a thousand times when they were growing up. It was the easiest sport to use to get them started. They'd loved it and so had he.

His mind flew back to the day Kathy, Wes, and the kids had left. He didn't want to remember, but the memories came nonetheless.

"It has to last you a long time, young lady," Griff said, giving his niece a hug.

"Aren't you coming to visit soon, like you promised?"

"We'll see."

She made a pouty face. "You always say that when you mean 'no'." She stamped her foot, crossed her arms, and glared at him.

"Missy Marie Thomas, have you walked Pookie and given your suitcase to Wes?" Kathy shooed the thirteen-year-old outside.

"Where's Joey?" Griff glanced around the living room. Quite a few pieces of furniture were on their way to San Francisco, making the room feel naked. Kathy's new husband, Wes Emerson, had taken a position with Global Tech and was taking his new family with him.

"It's Joe, now, Uncle Griff."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry, sorry. I forgot." He ruffled the fifteen-year-old's hair. At six four, Griff stood almost a whole head taller than the teen. He pulled the boy to him for a quick squeeze. Tears stung at the back of his eyes.

"Please check on your sister. She's supposed to be walking Pookie."

Joe nodded, waved to his uncle, and left.

"Now, you, mister." His sister rested her hands on her hips.

"I'll be fine, Kathy."

"I want you to have your own life, for a change. Get married. Have kids."

"Wave your magic wand and make Miss Perfect appear." He chuckled.

"Mom! Come on. We're ready," Joe called.

Blinking rapidly, Kathy embraced her brother. “‘Thank you’ doesn’t cover it, Griff. I...I...”
“I know,” he said, patting her on the back.

In an instant, she was down the stairs, tucked safely in the front seat while Wes maneuvered the overloaded car out of the driveway. Griff stood at the window. He raised his hand and rested it on the glass. A pain shot through his chest. His breathing became shallow as a lump in his throat cut off his air. Silence overwhelmed him.

The same pain returned as he watched the children play. *As if it were yesterday, not a month ago. How long before I get past it? Maybe never.*

“You must be that new fella looking to rent my place.” A small, slightly round woman with short, brown hair stood on the lawn, wiping her hands on an apron.

“Yep. That’s me. This your place?” He turned his gaze to the neat, quaint house, painted dark teal blue with cream trim. The small porch had a rocking chair, and the pointed roof added charm.

“It is. Rent’s three thousand a month. Due on the first. You got kids?” She looked him up and down.

“Nope.”

“Good. The house is full of antiques. My husband and I collect. We have a shop, too. Wouldn’t want kids running around breaking stuff. Any pets?”

Griff shook his head.

“Perfect. Come on in.” He followed her inside. The little bell on the front door took his attention, but only for a second. The mouth-watering aroma of baking bread engulfed him. *I’ll take it.*

“What are you making?”

“Pullman loaf. My husband’s favorite.”

“You own this, but live somewhere else?”

“Yep. We have a bigger one with a shop on the ground floor. It’s nearer the turnpike. You’ve probably passed it. Amy’s Antiques?”

He nodded, not sure he remembered, but wanting to be polite. The small living room had a fireplace with a screen and andirons. The furniture was antique and delicate. His brow furrowed. *Can I put my ass on that sofa without breaking it?* He joined Amy in the kitchen, where the smell was so strong it made his stomach rumble. She took two pans out of the oven and placed them on a rack.

“Do you need a hand?” he asked.

“Nope. Got it. I’m used to it. Do it all the time.”

The bread had a beautiful, light brown crust on top. Amy gently turned the loaves out onto the counter. “They’ll need a bit to cool. Maybe after we look upstairs, they’ll be cool enough to give you a slice. Would you like that?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve never had homemade bread before.”

She smiled at him. “That’s fine, then. You look awfully familiar. Should I know you?”

Griff cast his gaze to the floor. “I play pro football. Sometimes, I get in the local papers.”

“That’s it! Now, I recognize you. You’re the guy who wins all those games for the Kings.”

“I don’t win the games. It’s the team. I’m just the quarterback.”

“Crap, don’t be modest. Isn’t the team’s picture I see. It’s yours.” She narrowed her eyes for a long look at him. “And I can see why.”

That made Griff blush. “Maybe we should see upstairs?”

“Of course, of course.” She took off her apron and hung it on a hook then entered a tiny, winding stairway from the kitchen.

“Not sure I can fit in here,” he said, ducking his head.

“These are the back stairs, used by the maid and butler. Yeah. They are kinda small, aren’t they?” She eyed his broad shoulders before she backed out and led him to the front staircase.

They walked through a formal dining room with dark, antique wood furnishings, including a highly polished, oval table and six chairs. Griff glanced at the delicate legs and decided they wouldn’t hold him. But the room had charm, like stepping back in time, and he approved.

The bedrooms upstairs were adequate, though he had serious concerns about the length of the bed in the master suite. *It’s only for a few months.* Lace curtains, rag rugs, wood floors shined to perfection, and unique, hand-made quilts added the flavor of the period the house was from. Griff thought of it as a giant dollhouse when he had to duck to get through the doorway of the maid’s room in the back.

In the kitchen, Amy sliced off two thick pieces of warm bread. She pulled European butter from the fridge and spread it liberally before offering the plate to Griff. He accepted gladly. He closed his eyes as the first bite melted in his mouth. Amy tore hers in half and took a delicate nibble.

“This is amazing,” he said.

“Thank you. What do you think of the house?”

“It’s beautiful. You’ve got every little detail. I’ll take it.”

She clapped her hands once and grinned. “Great! You’re our first renter. And no worries about you being able to afford the place.”

Griff plucked his checkbook from his back pocket.

“One month’s security and one month’s rent, please.”

He nodded and wrote the check.

“I hope you’ll be very happy here.”

“I’m sure I will.”

Amy took the money and handed him the keys. “You can move in on Monday. Good luck, and I hope you keep winning.”

“Thanks, Amy.” Griff shook her hand. When he got back to the car, he turned and stared at the house. The beauty of and meticulous care given to the little Victorian impressed him. He was looking forward to living in this small, museum-type place so different from his own. Only for a second did he doubt the plans he’d agreed to for a modern renovation.

He shook his head slightly. *I’ll be like Alice, after she took the growth pills, squeezing myself into this mini-house. Its charm will be gone by the time my place is done.* Still, he viewed it as an adventure and a detour from his usual style. *Kathy would approve.*

* * * *

Rhode Island

“I’m sorry, Annette, I don’t know when I’m coming back. We’re moving my dad to a nursing home. I can’t do that overnight.”

“The Carpenters need you to work with the architect this week. I don’t know what you want me to do.”

Lauren took her lower lip between her teeth. “Do what you gotta do.”

“Della is available. I have to give it to her. I hope you understand.”

Lauren sighed. “I do. I get it.”

“I’m sorry. Hope everything goes well with your dad.”

“Thanks.” Lauren put her cell back in her purse. *So much for that commission.* She returned to the waiting room at the hospital.

Her big brother stood up and stretched. “How’d that go?”

“Not great.”

Don tilted his head and raised his eyebrows.

“No, I don’t want to talk about it.” *Can my life get any worse? I hope Bob left me enough money to pay the mortgage for a couple of months.* Anxiety gnawed at her stomach, making her queasy.

“Let’s get something to eat. I’m starved,” Don said, moving toward the hallway.

“You go ahead. I’m not hungry.”

He extended his arm, reaching for her hand. “Come on. You don’t have to get anything, but I hate to eat alone. Besides, enough moping.”

Lauren pasted a grin on her face for her brother’s benefit. His warm, dry hand squeezed hers, sending comfort through her. Whenever they’d had to get shots when they were kids, Don would always hold her hand. He’d kid her that she couldn’t make him say “ouch.” She’d focus on squeezing him so hard he’d have to yelp. The shot was over before she could panic. Afterward, he’d feign pain, moaning and groaning, gripping his hand. His antics made her laugh.

Don had always been there for her.

But adult problems couldn’t be handled so easily. Don was married with three sons and a daughter. He had his own stresses and strains. Besides, Lauren knew he couldn’t fix her life, no matter how hard he tried. Still, she was grateful for the concern he showed and the time he carved out of his tight schedule to devote to her and their father.

They sat down to two burgers and Cokes in the hospital cafeteria and talked about the options for their dad, looking over the pamphlets and discussing the advice from the social worker. Next step was visiting the recommended places, picking one, and trying to get him accepted.

That burden would fall on Lauren’s shoulders. Don had to get back to work. He sold cars and couldn’t miss so many days. He had a family to feed. Lauren only had herself and her pug, Zander. Now that she was losing the fat commission on decorating the Carpenter’s house, money would be tight.

She and Bob had been married such a short time that they had agreed to forego alimony. Lauren had gotten the house, Bob had gotten whatever furnishings he had wanted, and they had

called it quits. Clean and easy, he had said at the time. She frowned, remembering that conversation. *Clean and easy for you, maybe.*

There'll be other commissions. Annette's place is well known. I'll survive, even if I have to sell the house. Dad needs me now, and I've got to do this right. After lunch, Lauren took her notes, hugged her brother, and met with the social worker one more time.

She spent the next several days listening to doctors, visiting the homes, and reminiscing with her dad. After one week, the hospital gave her the green light to move him. Lauren had filled out the paperwork and waited to hear if the place she liked most would take him.

While she relished the time she spent with her father, looking at him, so shrunken and weak, was upsetting. He had played professional baseball, used to be strong and handsome. Now, he was a shadow of the man she had known, and it made her sad.

She rose early on Wednesday, the day she was to move her dad into the Springfield Residence. She hated the idea. Facing a plate of bacon and eggs at the diner down the block from her motel, her appetite went south. A lump gathered in her throat, closing it to food.

Don breezed through the door, his brows furrowed, his face grim. He slipped into the booth across from her. "Today's the day." He motioned to the waitress. She brought a pot of coffee over and filled his mug.

"Yep." Lauren's eyes filled.

Don reached over and squeezed her hand before he lifted his cup. "I know, Ferret," he said, using his childhood nickname for her.

"Don't call me that."

He smiled. "Knew I could get a rise out of you. Finish and let's get this thing over with. Then, let's get blasted."

Lauren took a forkful of eggs, finished the bacon, and wiped her lips with the napkin. "Sounds like a plan."

Don grabbed the check. They piled into his car and drove to the hospital.

* * * *

After four Savage Sunrises, Griff forgot where he was living and walked back to his old home, which was all sealed up. He turned around and headed to Mott Street, where the little Victorian rested. On the way, he passed a dark house and spied something moving by the back door.

A groundhog? A large rat? Curiosity coupled with alcohol emboldened him to move closer. The figure shifted, turning to face him. It uttered a low, threatening growl.

Griff stopped short. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he made out the form of a small dog. He took another step, and the pup started to bark. He peered into the shadows and made out the stubbed nose of a pug. By now, the canine was barking furiously. Griff backed up. As he continued on his way, the animal quieted and lay down, still watching him.

The next morning, he threw on his running gear and returned to the empty house to see if the pooch was still there. Curled up next to the back steps was the pug, which jumped up and began barking at Griff again. He looked in the windows and didn't see any signs of life. There was little furniture, and no car in the driveway.

He frowned. "Went off and left ya, did they?"

The racket continued then the little creature sat and panted.

"Bet you're thirsty." Griff ran back to his place for a bowl and a bottle of water. He approached carefully, stopping about halfway to set up the dish. The pug eyed him with suspicion. Griff filled the bowl and backed up. The dog sniffed and took a step toward the offering. The quarterback stood frozen, completely still, watching as the canine approached slowly and took a long drink.

"Probably hungry, too." He tossed a piece of bread at the bowl and laughed when it bounced away. *Not exactly a bullet pass.* The wary pooch took another drink then carted the bread in his mouth to a corner by the back steps. He scarfed it down, keeping his large, brown eyes trained on the footballer.

"Who leaves a dog outside to fend for himself?" Griff muttered under his breath. He shook his head and went back to his run.

Later that day, at the grocery store, Griff added dog food to his cart, determined to keep the feisty pug alive. He showed up at the house with more water and some food. This time, he didn't back away, but filled the bowl and crouched down. The starving dog approached cautiously, sniffing the air. When he got to the feast, he chowed down quickly.

Griff inched closer until he could reach out and touch the pooch. The animal lifted his gaze and growled. The football player put his hand out. The pug sniffed it then went back to eating. When he finished, he licked his chops and looked up at the quarterback, allowing the human to creep closer. Griff stretched out his hand and touched the furry head, then petted the dog. The creature sat up, allowing the man to continue.

After two meals, the dog, who Griff named “Spike,” came right up when the man arrived with food. After a couple of days, since there was no owner in sight, Griff decided to take him. Spike allowed the man to put a harness and leash on him and trotted along behind the football player home.

After a bath and a good meal, man and dog settled down on the sofa to watch television. Spike rested his head on Griff’s leg and closed his eyes. The quarterback smiled and petted his new friend. *This is what I need. A dog.* Although the animal couldn’t replace a family, he saw Spike as a first step toward having the life he wanted.

When Griff told Buddy about the new companion, his friend raised his eyebrows in surprise. “A dog? Really? You got a dog?”

“A pug. Named him Spike. I rescued him. I can’t believe he was abandoned.”

“How the hell are you gonna take care of a dog when we’re on the road?”

Griff put down the weight he was lifting and frowned. “Hadn’t thought about that. Guess I’ll have to board him.”

“What a fuckin’ pain in the ass. What were you thinking, man?”

“I couldn’t leave him there to starve, could I?”

“Toss him some food and call the A.S.P.C.A.”

“I didn’t think of that. He’s a good dog.”

“He’s still a pain,” Buddy said, shaking his head. “What’s happening to you? You’re getting domestic on me.”

Griff laughed. “Maybe you’re right. Man whore no more?”

“Damn! Don’t say that.”

When Griff got home after his workout, he was greeted with ferocious barking. When Spike identified his new owner, he quieted down, licking Griff’s hand and trotting behind him into the kitchen for dinner.

* * * *

After a tearful farewell with her father at the nursing home, Lauren slipped behind the wheel of her car and headed home. She tried to concentrate on the road, but sadness welled up inside her. *That may be the last time I see Dad.* The idea was too upsetting to think about. *I’ll have to come up here more often.* She focused on the road, sweeping disturbing thoughts from her mind.

Lauren chewed her lip as she wondered what would be waiting at her office. *Is there any work for me?* Annette set up her company differently. Everyone brought in business and used her resources. She also parceled out accounts and paid her decorators as consultants instead of employees. This arrangement meant Lauren didn't receive a salary or health insurance.

When she had been married to Bob, it hadn't mattered. Now, the tenuous work situation preyed on her mind. She needed to get back and check her bank balance. Anxiety made her depress the gas pedal. All at once, it hit her. *Why am I rushing? There's no one at home. No one will miss me or wonder if I'm dead if I'm an hour, or ten hours, late.*

Loneliness engulfed her. To get rid of the silence, she switched on the radio. Lauren loved quiet time to read, sketch, or think. Now, she dreaded filling the empty hours. *Thank God for the Girls' Night group, or I'd have nothing.* Her last conversation with Don came to mind.

"Are you dating anyone?"

"Dating? Really, Don. I'm divorced a couple of weeks."

"So? Never too early to get back on the horse."

"Wonderful analogy."

He grinned and shrugged.

"I'm not dating anyone, and just the idea makes me want to throw up."

"You're pretty, Laurie. Go for it. Get a real guy this time. Not some jerk."

"Nice to know you approve of my taste in men."

"Am I wrong?"

"Oh, shut up."

Don laughed at her remark and took her hand in both of his. Then, he changed the subject, leaving her relieved.

In the car, every song screeched about love—unrequited love, unspoken love, great love, sexy love, lost love—until she wanted to scream. *Doesn't anyone ever sing about anything else?* She turned off the radio. Love wouldn't be high on her list for some time. Maybe never. *Once a man finds out about me, he'll run for the hills.*

Lauren decided to channel her energy into her work. *Build up a clientele. Work my butt off. Then, maybe I can open my own company and not need Annette anymore.*

It was four o'clock when she rolled into her driveway. Feeling buoyed by her decision to become a workaholic, Lauren stopped on the threshold of the house. She put her suitcase down

and took a deep breath. *It's empty. Bob said he'd leave the bed and the couch. Be prepared.* Warm summer air caressed her face. *Why rush in? There's no one there, anyway.*

She sank down into a wicker chair and propped her feet up on the small table. Moving her dad had been exhausting, draining her emotional, as well as physically.

Picking up her cell, she dialed Canine Condo, where her Zander had been staying. *Thank God Bob agreed to let me keep him. Maybe it's not too late to get him tonight.*

"No, Lauren. Zander's not here."

"What? You sure? Bob was supposed to drop him off."

"Nope. We have room. Is he coming now?"

"No, thanks. I'm home." She closed the phone. Tears pricked at her eyes. *He lied. He took Zander. Why am I surprised? She pulled out a tissue. Don't be a wimp. Call him. Get your dog back!*

"What's up?" Bob sounded preoccupied.

"Why did you take Zander? Was telling me I could have him just another lie?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't have the dog. You dropped him at Canine Condo."

"What? You were supposed to do that. It was on the list, remember?"

"What list?"

"The one I gave you. That you balled up and refused to read."

"Well, if you saw I didn't read it, why didn't you drop him there?"

"I couldn't do everything, Bob."

"He's your problem now." Her ex-husband hung up.

Her heart beat quickened. Adrenaline pumped through her veins. She opened the front door and called the dog's name. No answer. She ran outside and repeated the action. No answer. Panic rose in her chest, her pulse thumping in her ear. No whimpers or barking broke the quiet of the summer day. *He's gone.* A sob broke from her throat as tears cascaded down her cheeks. *Zander, where are you?*

Chapter Three

After three days of leaving a crying dog at the door, Griff tucked Spike under his arm and strapped him in the backseat of his fancy car. Once he got to the gym, he wasn't sure what to do, so he fastened the leash to a machine by the door.

The pug curled up and was snoring, until three teammates walked in. Spike jumped, barking at the men, startling them. They laughed at the little dog, with the fur on the back of his neck standing up and his little legs stiff.

Griff put down the barbell and took hold of the lead. "Whoa, Spike. These are friends."

"You can't have a dog in here," Bullhorn Brodsky, offensive lineman, said.

"What's the matter? Don't you like dogs?" Griff asked.

"Hell, yeah, I like dogs. Not in the training room. What if he takes a shit in here? It'll stink up the whole place." Bullhorn wrinkled his nose in anticipation.

"He just did, Bull. Not likely he will again."

"You'd be surprised. My dog takes a dump three times a day."

"You've got a Rottweiler. Big dogs, big shit."

Devon Drake, the cornerback, crouched down and extended his hand to Spike. The dog sniffed it then gave him a lick. "He likes me. I say we keep him. He can be our mascot."

"Just so he doesn't shit in here, Montgomery," Bullhorn said.

"Speaking of shit, ever smell yourself after a game, Bull?" Griff made a face. "Makes Spike's smell good."

The men laughed as they chose their machines. Buddy joined Griff in the weight area.

"You're keeping this dog, eh?" Buddy asked, adjusting the weight on the apparatus.

"Yep. Gives me a reason to go home."

"How about a warm, naked, female body under the covers?"

"Got someone in mind?"

Buddy chuckled. "I wish. I guess a pooch is better than nothing."

After working out, Griff took Spike out to the field to run with him. The small dog sprinted for a bit then trotted over to the cool grass that had recently been watered and lay down, panting.

“Is that a dog or a rat? He’s got no stamina,” Brodsky said, as he started a lap.

“He’s a little guy. Leave him alone, Bull.”

“You’re worried about me hurting his feelings? Bullshit! He’s an animal, Griff.”

“I know, I know.” Griff couldn’t account for the protective feelings he had for the pug. Maybe it was the fact the canine had been abandoned and starving that touched the quarterback’s heart. Whatever it was, he had become insanely attached to the creature, quickly. Although he’d never admit it, he guessed that he and Spike had an understanding about loneliness, about being deserted, and had formed a silent pact to have each other’s backs.

Spike needed Griff, and it felt good. Maybe only in a small way, but it was a beginning, a tiny step back to the life he had lived.

“He’s full grown. Where did you get him?” Bull asked, approaching the snoozing pup.

“I found him, starving, hanging around an empty house.”

“So, he’s not yours?”

“He is now.”

The footballer picked up the pug and headed for the showers. Spike slept on the floor of the locker room until his master was dressed. They got in the car and drove to town to get some errands done. Griff intended to check out the local dog-boarding place. He needed to arrange for doggie daycare when he went to training camp.

After spending more time than he cared to in the pharmacy and the grocery store, Griff cursed out Kathy for leaving, for the umpteenth time. *She used to do all this shit. Fuck. Why couldn’t she find a guy who lived here?*

The downtown section of Monroe was quaint. Some of the buildings had distinct New England flavor, with colorful shingles, white trim, and black shutters. He made his way down the street with Spike trotting alongside. They stopped at Canine Condo. A pretty redhead sat at the front desk. She greeted Griff with a broad, warm smile. He had to ask for information on their services twice, as her attention shifted to Spike.

She was crouched down, talking to and petting the dog, which licked her face. When she stopped giggling, she turned her gaze on Griff. While he considered flirting with her, he picked up on her lack of interest quickly. He figured it out when he spied her wedding ring. He pocketed the boarding information and guided the reluctant pooch out to the sidewalk.

* * * *

Lauren walked down Main Street in Monroe, past cute shops. Barb's Boutique, Monroe Gift Shoppe, and the Love-to-Read bookstore, sporting a poster announcing a signing for one of her favorite authors, but Lauren didn't see it.

She'd been in a daze since she had lost Zander, staring out at the world with unseeing, green eyes. A week later, pain still flowed in her veins. Her feet ached from trekking to every lamppost and telephone pole in her neighborhood to tape up lost dog flyers. Exhaustion and depression weighed her down. The unbearable quiet at home drove her to take long walks. While out, she called Zander, but got no response.

On her way to Sandy's Salon to get a trim, a familiar bark drew her attention. Her head snapped up. There, coming down the sidewalk on the other side of the road, was a pug who looked an awful lot like Zander. He was on a leash held by a tall, good-looking man. Lauren's heart rate doubled. She whispered to herself, "Zander."

"Hey!" she called out, but the man didn't look her way. "Zander. Zander!" she hollered, her voice getting higher each time. The dog turned and barked. That was all Lauren needed.

She raced into the street. A car making its way to the south end of town screeched on its brakes. The man holding the dog dropped the lead and leapt in front of her. He snatched her arm and yanked her out of the way. She fell to her knees on the pavement, but didn't feel the pain because the pug was licking her face. She kept repeating his name as tears flowed.

"You okay, lady?" the man asked, grasping her elbow and easing her to her feet.

Lauren clutched his arm while her knees trembled. She narrowed her eyes. "You stole my dog," she said, before bending over to pet the pooch.

Lauren sensed his stare. She swung her head and caught him looking at her nicely rounded bottom. Their gazes met. She noticed the lusty light emanating from his chocolate brown eyes, and it made her shiver.

She stood up and turned to him, flipping her hair over her shoulder, pursing her lips. Flashing green eyes threw a cold look his way as her shoulders straightened, attempting to reduce the view of her cleavage. She rested her hands on her hips as he stared at her, frozen.

He snapped to attention. "What?"

"You heard me. You stole my dog. This is Zander. And he's mine." She reached for the pug's leash.

As he raised it above her head, his eyes narrowed. “So, you’re the asshole who left this dog to starve and die? No way are you getting him back. I should call the cops.”

“Who the hell are you, and what the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m Griffin Montgomery. I found this dog, starving, guarding an empty house. Your house? Did you conveniently forget you had him? And now, you want him back? Go to hell.” He gritted his teeth. His eyes darkened, and his hands fisted at his side. He pulled Zander closer to him and moved his long legs forward.

She tugged on his arm. “I’m Lauren Farraday. That’s my dog. Give him to me.” Her jaw tightened, her lips compressed into a thin line, and her arm outstretched.

“On a cold day in Hell. If you were a man, I’d take you behind that store and beat the shit out of you, Miss Lauren Farra-I-don’t-give-a-shit-what-your-name-is.” He took a menacing step toward her.

Fear coursed through her, forcing her to retreat, as she closed her fingers around the lead and opened her mouth. “Help! Police!”

A policeman strolled over. Griff Montgomery made a face and shifted his weight. The officer tipped his cap at the quarterback and scowled at Lauren. “What seems to be the trouble here, Mr. Montgomery?”

“Him? You’re asking him? I’m the one who screamed,” Lauren said, puffing her chest out, until she saw Griff staring.

“Mr. Montgomery is the quarterback for The Connecticut Kings, miss.”

“Oh? And that makes him God? He stole my dog!”

The officer laughed. “I seriously doubt that, miss.”

“Lauren Farraday, officer.”

“Miss Farraday. Griff, what is this about?”

Shit! He’s on a first name basis with the police. I’m doomed.

Griff related his side of the story.

“Zander is micro-chipped, officer. Can you read those?”

“I’m afraid you’ll both have to come down to the station, so we can investigate her claim. Sorry, Griff. We’ll get this straightened out. I’m sure there’s nothing to her story, and if she neglected this dog, we’ll call Animal Care and Control. We’ll look her up. See if there have been

other complaints.” The cop gave Lauren a stern look as he returned to his car. “Follow me,” he instructed.

“We’ll see, Mr. Football Player, just whose dog this is,” she sniffed.

“Come along, come along. Leave Mr. Montgomery alone. He hasn’t broken the law, lady, and maybe you have.”

Lauren stuffed her outrage down and slipped behind the wheel of her car. When Griff loaded Zander into his vehicle, the pug barked. The sound tugged at her heart as she drove the short distance to police headquarters. *I have to get him back. He’s my life now.*

* * * *

Walking from the parking lot to the courthouse, Lauren looked up at the sky. *Do I still have an umbrella in the trunk? She chewed her lip. This silk suit will be ruined.*

She had come to fight for custody of Zander against Griff Montgomery. Griff claimed to have saved his life. Told the police she had neglected the dog. But that was all wrong.

Bob was to blame. In his rush to move to L.A., he had forgotten about Zander, an animal he had never liked anyway. Tears gathered in her eyes as she considered the possibility of losing the case. Zander and a half-empty house were all she had. She sighed, a deep shuddering breath, as she approached the building.

When she turned the corner, she almost ran into Griff Montgomery. The six foot, four inch, football player stood on the steps, looking devastatingly handsome in a perfectly tailored, navy blue suit and white shirt.

Cameras clicked and reporters swarmed around the charismatic quarterback. Her heart sank as she watched him smile with confidence. Even his stance shouted, ‘winner’. *He’s famous. I’m nobody. I don’t stand a chance.*

A loud boom interrupted her thoughts. The clouds moved in swift, angry bunches then the heavens opened up. She ran inside in time to avoid being drenched. Her shoulders drooped. She blinked rapidly as her gaze connected with Griff’s. His eyes narrowed when she brushed away a runaway tear before she turned her back and escaped into the ladies’ room. *I’ll be damned if I’m gonna let him see me cry.*

She rinsed her face and cracked open the door. Griff was nowhere to be seen. She crept out and took a seat in the back of the courtroom. Griff was in the first row with Zander on his lap. Lauren ached to pet her pug, but sat quietly, her hands folded in her lap.

She looked around for another woman sitting alone. Don had hired a lawyer for Lauren, as she didn't have the funds. They had conferred on the phone, but had never met in person.

When Lauren's name was called, she stood up.

A woman sitting across the aisle from her also rose. She whispered in Lauren's ear, "I'm Marcy Chase. Nice to finally meet you."

Don, bless you.

Marcy squeezed Lauren's hand. "Don't worry. We'll win."

"But he's so popular," Lauren said, as Marcy opened the gate. She motioned her client to be quiet as they took their seats behind the table.

Lauren peeked over at Griff, sitting at the other one. He had a lawyer, too, who shot a nasty look her way. She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. She studied the quarterback. The planes of his face suggested high cheekbones and a chiseled jaw. His lips looked firm, but full enough to promise a sensuous kiss. His piercing brown eyes connected with hers. They were cold and confident. She shivered.

Marcy squeezed her hand again then motioned for her to stand as the bailiff announced the arrival of the judge.

After everyone sat, the official spoke. "I've read the papers from both sides. Why don't you each tell me your version of the story, in fifty words or less? Mr. Montgomery, would you like to go first?"

"Objection." Marcy rose to her feet. "Doesn't the plaintiff usually have the right to go first?"

"If you want to stand on ceremony. Go ahead, Ms. Farraday." The judge made a face as he waved his hand at her.

His reaction made Lauren more nervous. *No way am I winning.* She went up to the witness stand and was sworn in. As she told her part, she noticed Griff Montgomery's glare soften. He looked at her with curious eyes. His presence filled the room and made her stammer. "My instructions to Bob were clear. But he often didn't follow what I said. One reason why we're not together. But that's another story."

"So, you thought your dog was in daycare?"

“Yes. You can ask the people at Canine Condo. I called them as soon as I got home.”

“And what did you do when you found out the animal wasn’t there?”

“I cried.”

“And then what?” the judge persisted.

“I put up signs all over the neighborhood.” She opened her purse and pulled out a wrinkled piece of construction paper. *How feeble is this? I sound ridiculous.*

“I see. Thank you, Ms. Farraday. You may step down.”

Lauren’s legs wobbled. She grasped the railing around the box and took a deep breath. One peek at Griff’s mocking expression made her mad. *He thinks I’m faking for the judge.* She marshaled her strength, straightened up, and marched to her seat with a confidence she didn’t feel. He raised his eyebrows. *Dognapping bastard.*

“Now, Mr. Montgomery. If that’s all right with you, counsel?” The judge shot a derisive look at Marcy, who nodded.

Griff strode to the witness stand. His confident swagger annoyed Lauren. *Thinks he’s hot shit. So does the judge and every guy in this courtroom.* She frowned as she listened to his tale. It opened her mind to the truth.

As he went on, taking much more time than she had, she realized that the real villain was Bob, not Griff. Although she despised him for refusing to give up the pup, she was glad he had taken Zander in and fed him. The pug might have died if the footballer hadn’t found him. She had to be grateful for that. If she had found a helpless dog with no food or water, she would have assumed the same thing about the owner that he had about her.

Shame filled her. His account of the facts would have put her in a terrible light, making her appear to be an animal abuser, if she had not already explained. She wondered if her version had been wiped out by the athlete’s side. The judge frowned when he looked at her, and her hope to get Zander back grew dim.

The justice asked no questions and dismissed Griff when he’d finished his recounting. The magistrate shuffled through papers on his desk, stopping to read, and then turning to another. The courtroom was silent.

“Okay. Seems obvious to me. While the microchip and vet documents verify Ms. Farraday’s claim to this dog, her actions cast doubt on her ability to provide for his welfare. On the other hand,

Mr. Montgomery's papers and veterinarian documents substantiate his ability to keep the dog in good health."

"I object. The health of the dog was established by the care given by Ms. Farraday first. Mr. Montgomery only had the dog for two weeks. His overall health could not have deteriorated that fast."

"Overruled."

Marcy sat down, and Lauren's confidence sank.

"As I was saying...this is an easy case. I'm putting the dog in joint custody for six months. At that time, Mr. Montgomery will report back to the court, with vet testimony, as to the care of this animal. If the dog receives quality care from Ms. Farraday during her time with him, then the court will return Zander to her. If he does not, then Mr. Montgomery will retain sole custody. At that time, I would entertain the possibility of visitation for Ms. Farraday."

"I object!" Both lawyers jumped to their feet at the same time.

"What? Why?" As they started to squabble, the judge banged his gavel. "I've given my ruling. Objections are overruled. You two work out the schedule. Share the dog. Court is adjourned."

Lauren let out the breath she was holding. *At least I didn't lose him. But share him with that...monster?*

Griff's face was stormy. He strode over to her with Zander under his arm. "I'm keeping him."

Lauren pushed to her feet and steeled herself. "You heard the judge. He's mine. You can share him for six months then find yourself a new pet."

"That's what you think."

"What's the matter? Did you expect to win? Did you think that because you're some hot shit athlete, the judge would just give you Zander and ignore the fact that he belongs to me? Well, you were wrong."

"I thought the judge would give him to someone who cared for him. Not an animal abuser."

"Weren't you listening? Bob is the one at fault here. Not me."

"You married that asshole. So, it's your fault."

"Really?" She cocked an eyebrow at him. "That's faulty logic. All brawn and no brains. You're an idiot."

Griff stepped toward her, his fist raised, until his attorney pulled him away.

"Come on. Let's go outside and discuss the schedule."

* * * *

“I’ll take him during the week. You can have him on weekends,” Griff said.

“Wait a minute. That’s not fair.”

“Fair enough for someone as irresponsible as you.”

“The judge said joint custody. I get equal time.”

Griff’s lawyer shot him a warning look.

“What’s your idea?” Griff shifted his weight. *She’s gonna be a pain in the ass.*

“Every other week.”

“Nope. Not gonna work for me.”

“Why not?” She looked up, her mouth pouty, distracting him.

“Saturday nights are my late nights. Sometimes, I don’t get home until two or three...or not at all.” He sensed heat rising in his face as Lauren stood quietly, blushing. “Of course, if that’s your late night, too...”

“It isn’t, no. I’m home. Every Saturday night,” she blurted out.

“No social life? Hmm. I can see why.”

“What does that mean?” She fisted her hands and planted them on her hips.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Try again.”

“All right, every other week, but we make the exchange on the weekend.”

“Don’t want you to miss your night out whoring,” she sneered.

“If you were a man...” Griff clenched his fingers at his sides, his temper barely controlled.

“If I were a man, what? You’d punch me?”

“Damn right.”

“Bully.”

Griff laughed. His gaze swept over Lauren’s curvy body. “I take it back. It’s a shame you’re home on Saturday night. Could be making some man happy.”

“Oh?” Her tone was warmer.

“Some man who’s a glutton for punishment and likes to screw bitches.”

Her hand came up and slapped him so fast even Griff couldn’t react quickly enough.

“Holy shit. Did you just assault him in the courthouse?” his lawyer asked.

Lauren's attorney gasped, grabbed her by the wrist, and escorted her out and down the front steps. "What are you doing?"

"He...he...he called me a bitch."

"You can't hit people."

"I didn't hurt him. He's twice my size."

Griff rubbed his cheek, glaring at her, as he descended the stairs.

"Look, if you two can't agree to a schedule, we will," his lawyer said, looking at Marcy.

"Okay. I drop him off with you on Sunday afternoon. You give him back to me on Saturday morning," Lauren said. "I'm sorry I hit you."

"Fine," Griff agreed, through gritted teeth.

"Can I say goodbye to Zander?"

He lowered the dog to the sidewalk. Lauren knelt down. When he wagged his tail and licked her, she buried her face in his fur. Griff saw her shoulders move. *Oh, no. Shit. Don't. Don't cry. Please don't cry. I can't take it.* Within seconds, Lauren was clutching the pug to her chest, sobbing. People leaving the courthouse stopped to stare. One or two came over to Griff for his autograph.

He scribbled something quickly then took her firmly by the arms and raised her to her feet. "Don't cry. Okay? I can't stand it." Griff's heart melted as he watched her cling to the canine. Memories of comforting his niece and nephew during their bouts of tears after a bad day tore at his guts. Tempted to let her have the dog, he remembered the lonely nights made better by Spike's presence.

She fished a tissue out of her purse and dabbed her eyes and nose. "I don't care."

"Come on, lady. Please."

"My name is Lauren."

"Okay, Lauren. No tears. All right?"

She sniffled twice, blew her nose, and then nodded. "I'm okay. He's been mine for three years."

"He's a great little guy."

"Warm on a cold night. Cuddles with me when I watch television. Always by my side."

"Me, too."

She looked up at him with full eyes. "You love him, too, don't you?"

“I wouldn’t say love...maybe ‘like a lot.’ I’m used to him. That’s all.”

“You wouldn’t fight so hard to keep him if you didn’t love him.”

Though she spoke softly, out of earshot of the crowd forming, her words stripped him bare. She saw through his façade, saw how much the little pooch meant to him. He looked at the ground and shuffled his feet.

Two more people approached for autographs, and he was relieved to have the distraction.

“Drop him at my house,” she said, scribbling on a piece of paper. “On Saturday morning.”

He took the address and picked up the dog. “Deal.”

Lauren gave the animal one last pet and hurried to the parking lot, her cheeks wet. Griff watched until her car pulled out.

“Hey, Griff, what was that about?” a spectator asked.

“Just a misunderstanding,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. He shook hands with both attorneys and headed for his car. After fastening the pug in, Griff rested his forehead on the wheel. He took a deep shuddering breath and blinked rapidly. *I’m gonna lose him, too. He belongs to her.*

The idea of another loss squeezed his heart. He’d grown attached to Spike and didn’t know how he’d be able to let him go, even six months from now. He sat back, turned the key in the ignition, and put the vehicle in gear. *Gonna have to ramp up my search for a wife and a new life. I’ve got six months to find her. I can’t let him go until she’s in my life.*

The tightness in his chest loosened a little. A woof from the backseat made him smile as he rounded the corner and pulled into the driveway of the little Victorian.

When Griff opened the door, Spike ran into the house, right to his water bowl. The quarterback followed his dog into the kitchen and filled his dish with food. He straddled a chair to watch the pug wolf down his meal. *At least he needs me.* The thought eased the pain in his heart a little.

To be continued...

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