

William and Emily

By Kate Simon

William opened his eyes and saw acoustical tile. He closed his eyes and groaned. His chest was on fire. He tried to think back. Lunch with Lenny at the deli. He remembered the worst heartburn he'd ever had. Then, nothing. He moved his arm and felt a pinch. He looked over and saw an IV. Damn. He was in the hospital.

"Mr. Taggart, welcome back."

He looked up and saw a beautiful woman checking his IV. She had deep brown eyes and her brown hair was pulled up in a ponytail. "What happened to me?"

"You've just had open heart surgery."

"Fuck." He looked at the woman who was smiling at him. "Sorry."

"Don't worry. If I had my chest cracked open, I'd be swearing a blue streak." She pulled a large rolling table into his room. "I need to take your vitals." She put clip on his finger and a cuff on his arm.

"What time is it?"

"About ten o'clock."

"Damn."

"I'll have one of the residents come in to see you. They'll explain your condition."

"Thank you..."

"Emily."

"Thank you, Emily." Even through his pain, he liked her smile. Okay, he wasn't dead yet.

Twenty painful minutes later a kid in a white coat entered his room. Great, Doogie Howser was his doctor.

"Hello, Mr. Taggart. I'm Dr. Harris."

"Are you sure?" To his credit, the kid snickered.

“I get that a lot. Well, let’s get to the particulars. You had a myocardial infarction.”

“English, please.”

“You had a heart attack.”

“Crap”

“Yeah, pretty much,” he smiled. “You were brought in unconscious. We discovered you had a major blockage. You were operated on and the blockage was cleared and a stent was inserted. The surgery went very well. You were fortunate that you got to the ER so quickly.”

“Fortunate?”

“Things could have gone very differently. You’ll be here for another four or five days and you’ll need to take it easy for at least the next six weeks. What do you do?”

“I’m retired”

“Good. That means you’ll be able to relax. Your surgeon will be in tomorrow. He’ll go into more detail. In the meantime I can order you some pain med.”

William rolled his eyes and sighed. “Thank God.”

The nurse returned a few minutes later with a needle. “I have your pain med.”

“Thank you.”

“Before I do this, is there anyone we should call? You came in via ambulance. We don’t have any more information than you had on you.”

“No. There’s no one.”

Emily Russo went back to nurses station and made notes for the patient in 810. He was a bit of a mystery. Being grumpy as hell was to be expected after having open heart surgery but there was something about William Taggart. He said there was no one to call. That was unusual for a man his age. There was usually a wife, a girlfriend, a friend of some kind.

She took a look at his chart. He vitals were stable and considering what he'd been through he was in good shape. Surprisingly good shape. She smiled to herself. Just because she was a professional didn't mean she couldn't notice handsome man when she saw him.

Emily liked night shift. It was usually quiet and it gave her time to have a life in the sunshine. She even had time to visit her mother for her weekly guilt trip for being single and childless. She'd vowed to never settle for less than what she wanted. She didn't just want a man she loved, she wanted a man she liked. She'd seen so many of her friends fall into the trap of passion without substance. They had so little in common with their mates that when the fire waned they had nothing left. Her mother said she was too fussy and if she wasn't careful she'd die alone. Frankly, Emily would prefer that than suffer the fates of her friends. If only she could get her mother to believe she was happy with her life. She loved being a nurse. She loved her charity work. Honestly, she liked who she was. She wasn't as good as some, she wasn't as bad as others, but as humans went, Emily Russo thought she'd do just fine.

She did her rounds and checked on Mr. Taggart. His EEG readings were stable and she almost hated to wake him. She couldn't help but stare at him. He had broad, strong shoulders and she smiled at the memory of his bright blue eyes. He had shaggy, sandy brown hair shot with silver. His beard was more silver than brown and she fought the urge to touch it. She took a breath and touched his shoulder. "Mr. Taggart."

His head turned and his eyes fluttered opened. "Huh?"

"It's Emily. I need to take your vitals." She put the clip on his finger and put the cuff on his arm. It puffed up and took his pressure. She grabbed the thermometer and rubbed it over his head.

"What's that?"

"It's a new type of thermometer."

"Very Star Trek."

Emily chuckled and held up her hand splitting her fingers into a V. “Live long and prosper.” She thought she saw a smile.

“Not bad,” he whispered.

“How are you doing?”

“Isn’t that what you’re suppose to tell me?”

“Fair point. Your vital signs are strong. Your pressure is only slightly elevated. That’s understandable considering what you’ve been through today. Now, it’s your turn. How is your pain level on a scale of one to ten?”

“A five, maybe a six. I’ve had worse.”

Emily made a note on his chart. “You’re due for another shot. I’ll be back with it in a few minutes.” She returned with his shot and put it into his IV. “This should help.” She tied the call button around the rail of his bed. “This is your call button. I’m just a push button away.”

He smiled as the powerful med hit his system. “Good to know.”

“Good night, Mr. Taggart.”

“William,” he whispered.

“Good night, William.” Emily closed his door behind her and closed her eyes. She was glad she wasn’t hooked up to an EEG because her heart was pounding.

William mindlessly flipped channels on the TV. The cable wasn't bad but he couldn't find anything that caught his interest. He hated this, flat out hated this. He hated being stuck in the hospital, hated the food, hated the pain in his chest. Most of all he hated bed pans. He didn't think he'd ever hated anything as much as he hated bed pans. Well, maybe there was something.

He hadn't been in the hospital in fifteen years. He hated it then, he hated it now. Back then one speeding idiot destroyed his life. It took a full day before he woke up. He kept asking for Anna and Kathy but the nurses just looked at him with sad faces. He finally screamed out for them.

"Where are my wife and daughter?!" It took a few minutes but he recognized the man who walked into his room. Andrew Scott was the fire department chaplain. He only showed up to deliver bad news. He grabbed his arm. "Where are my family?"

"Lieutenant Taggart, I'm very sorry to tell you that your wife and daughter did not survive the crash."

All he remembered after that was screaming. They couldn't be gone, they just couldn't. But they were. He attended their funeral in a wheelchair. The accident had shattered his knee and damaged his spine. No one knew if he'd ever walk again. He did but not for the reason most people thought. It wasn't to get back to normal. There was no more normal. His injuries ended his career as a firefighter. People were hovering, men from his station and their wives, Anna's friends, they all wanted to help. All he wanted was to be left alone. So he did his therapy and got to a point where he could take care of himself. Once he could stand on his own two feet, he sold or gave away almost everything in their house. Then he sold the house and moved to a remote lake house, thirty minutes outside of town.

He'd only come into town to have lunch with Lenny. They'd started at the academy together. He was one of the few people he had contact with from his former life. Lenny was a good guy and never pressed him about his life then or now. He even came out to William's place to fish.

Now here he was, back in the hospital, with those damn bed pans.

He looked at the door and saw two nurses with the rolling computer cart. "Hello Mr. Taggart," said the day shift nurse. He thought she said her name was Shannon. "We're doing our change of shift report."

He noticed Emily was standing with the day nurse. Her name he remembered. Shannon gave Emily reports on blood work and his vital signs. He didn't think there could be so much information about in in eight hours. Shannon gave him a pointed look.

"Nutrition has reported Mr. Taggart isn't eating."

Emily also drilled him with a look that made him uncomfortable. "Is your stomach bothering you?" she asked as if she already knew the answer.

"No. My stomach is fine. The menu is lacking. I don't eat rabbit food. I asked for a burger but I got broth."

"Burgers are what got you here. I'll bring you something and you'll eat it," said Emily.

"I will? Why?"

"Because you need to eat healthy to get better."

William made a derisive noise.

Emily grinned. "Because I control your pain med."

William snickered. "You're a tough little thing."

She leaned close as she wrapped his bicep with the blood pressure cuff. "You have no idea."

He looked up into her eyes and realized if she could, she'd be laughing. He felt his heart starting to race and it had nothing to do with his surgery.

Emily finished her first round of the night and took a minute in the break room. Shannon was putting on her jacket as she got ready to go home. "He's something, isn't he?"

"Who?" asked Emily as she grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

"Don't who me. Taggart. I saw the way you looked at him."

"Please. He's a patient."

"He's a hot patient."

"Shannon, I would never, you know that."

"Oh, I know you would never be inappropriate with a patient, but he won't be a patient forever. I've looked at his chart. He's got the constitution of a bull moose. Anyone with his medical history would be in a lot worse shape. Be prepared, though. He's really miserable. He hasn't had any visitors."

"I asked him if there was anyone to call and he said no."

"Wow. That surprises me."

"Surprised me too."

"Well, we're all going to have our hands full with him. If we can't get him motivated it will affect his recovery." She picked up her purse. "I'll see you tomorrow. Good luck."

Emily thought to herself about how she was going to help William. First things first. She picked up the phone. "Hello, nutrition."

William's stomach growled. If the pain in his chest wasn't enough, he was starving. Heart attack or not, he deserved real food. Lenny had called him to see how he was doing. He told him there was no need to come to the hospital, he'd be home soon enough. His surgeon had been in this morning. He'd been groggy from the last pain shot but what little he understood the guy said was he was lucky to be alive. Yeah, lucky. No more corned beef. A girl walked into his room carrying a tray.



“If that’s more broth you can take it back.”

She gave him the stink eye before she pulled the cover off the dish. “Not broth.” She took the lid and walked out. He was surprised to see what looked like turkey, roast potatoes and vegetables.

“Oh good. They brought your tray.” He looked up and saw Emily coming into the room. “I called your doctor and he put you on full diet.” She turned the tray so it was easier for him to eat.

“It could use some stuffing.”

“It’s a heart healthy full diet.” She smiled and handed him the fork. “Just eat it. Maybe then you’ll stop growling at everyone.”

He glanced up from his dinner. “I don’t growl.”

“Like a freaking grizzly bear. Now eat. I’ll be back when you’re done.”

William watched Emily leave as he took a bite of his potatoes. That nurse was feisty. He cleaned his plate in short order. Surgery or not, thirty six hours without a meal was too much for anyone. He didn’t know how much more of this place he could take. It was so noisy he never slept more than a couple of hours at a time. Just when he fell asleep, someone would come in to take his temperature or ask him stupid questions. No, he didn’t have a history of heart disease. Yes, he lived alone and took care of himself. How old did they think he was? They wanted to know about his knee and his back. What did that have to do with anything? That happened fifteen years ago. Yeah, they still ached but he got around fine. He just wanted out of here.

“Oh, good. You finished your dinner. Our kitchen is pretty good.”

“It’s alright.”

“Damn. Tough case,” she said as she pulled up the sheet covering his feet. She opened a plastic bag and pulled out a pair of bright yellow socks with what looked like white treads.

“My feet aren’t cold.”

She ignored him and pulled down the bedrail. She unplugged his IV machine and wrapped the cord around the machine's pole. "Ok, Mr. Taggart, let's get you on your feet. We're going to take a walk."

"Where?"

"Let's try a lap around the floor."

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm not walking around people in this dress."

Emily rolled her eyes at him. "Fine. I'll be back." She walked out of his room and came back with another hospital gown. She took his arm. "Swing your legs around and I'll help you stand."

"What's with the gown?"

"I'll put it on backwards over the gown you have on. That way you won't distress the ladies with your manly physique."

William couldn't help but laugh. "Very funny."

"Come on, Mr. Taggart. We need to get you moving. You don't want to be tied to a bed pan forever, do you?"

He shook his head. "Fine." She helped him to his feet, holding on to his arm with one hand and pulling the IV machine with the other. She opened the snaps at the shoulders of the second gown and wrapped it around his arm, avoiding his IV tubes. She carefully led him into the hallway. He was surprised that he was so shaky.

"Take it easy, Mr. Taggart. Not so fast."

"William."

"William, huh. I don't know. William seems so...conservative. You seem like a Tag."

He stopped and looked at her. "No one's called me that since I was a kid."

She nodded and smiled. "Tag it is." They did a lap around the floor and then went back to his room. "Do you want to use the bathroom while I'm changing your sheets?"

"Yes and why are you changing my sheets? Don't aides do that?"

"Normally, yes. But the aide was intimidated by you." Emily opened the bathroom door and pointed to a pull chain near the toilet. "Pull that if you need me. I'm going to get your linens."

William was glad to not have to use a bed pan anymore. He washed up and used the toothbrush and toothpaste they provided. He unwrapped a comb and ran it through his hair and beard. He pulled on the neck of his gown and looked at the bandage running down his chest. "Damn." He opened the door and pulled his IV machine with him.

"How'd you make out?" she asked.

"About how'd you'd expect."

She stood with her hands on her hips. "You really are a piece work, Tag."

"Look, I'm sorry. I'm just a cranky old man."

"No you're not. I see your chart. You're only a couple of years older than me, and I'm sure as hell not old."

"What? How old are you?"

"Smooth, Tag. Do you want me to help you with that extra gown."

"Yes." He added quickly, "Please." She moved behind him and started unsnapping this extra gown. "So, how old are you?"

"I'm fifty four. You're only fifty eight. You're no old man." She took the gown and folded it while he got back in bed. "And I sure as hell am no old woman."

William smiled. "On that I will agree."

Emily tried to focus on her monitor. She was supposed to be inputting data on Tag but all she could think about was how he made her heart race. As she helped him with the extra gown she got a good view of the scars on his back and his leg. She'd read his file and knew he'd had multiple surgeries to repair damage from a car accident. But all she could think of was his very fine ass. She gave herself a mental shake. She was ashamed of herself. She was a professional. She'd never been inappropriate with a patient. What was it about William Taggart, a cranky as hell, miserable cus, made her forget everything but his beautiful eyes?

Over the next few days she tried her best to be professional. She got him out for at least one walk per shift. His physical recovery was ahead of normal schedule. His emotional recovery seemed to be stalled. She couldn't figure him out but if she was going to help him fully recover, she had to try.

"Good evening, Tag. How are you feeling today?"

"I'll be fine when I get out of here."

Emily put her hands on her hips and sighed. This was getting out of hand. "I'll be back." She came back with a wheelchair and a spare gown for a robe. "Come on. We're going for a ride."

"What?"

"You said you want out. You're getting out, at least off the floor. Now get it in gear, Tag." He stood on less shaky legs and quickly put on his second gown and got him set in a chair. She grabbed a blanket and tucked it around his waist.

"I don't need that."

She couldn't help smiling at him. "You don't but remember, we're protecting the sensibilities of the lady folk. I don't need a bunch of females chasing after your manly form."

Tag laughed. "Doesn't being blind affect your profession?"

Emily looked him in the eyes and said quietly, "My vision is perfect." She pulled herself away and pushed the chair out the door. She'd told the others she was taking Tag off the floor. It wasn't normal procedure, especially at this hour, but they were busy enough with their own patients not to mind. They'd cover her other patients for her and beep her pager in an emergency. She called for the elevator and took him down to the atrium. She often gave her for her break. It was a beautifully landscaped patio with benches surrounded by tall, thin cypress trees. The light from the hospital and the security lights made it a peaceful retreat.

"What is this?"

"Out. You said you wanted out. You're out." She thought she saw a smile.

"I guess."

Emily sat down on the bench. "What is with you? I'm trying to reach you but you won't let me or anyone in. Most people in your situation would be grateful just to be alive."

Tag made a derisive sound. "Grateful. Yeah."

She turned his chair to face her. "Tell me. What is it? You can recover from this and go on to live a perfectly normal life."

He sighed and looked to the top of the trees. "My life hasn't been normal for fifteen years."

"Was that when your knee and back were hurt?"

"Drunk driver."

"You recovered from that. There's no reason you can't come back from this."

"You don't get it. That guy took everything from me. He took family and my career. He left me with nothing. If he hadn't been killed too I'd have killed him myself."

She put her "Tag, tell me about them."

"Anna was my wife. We met in high school. Kathy was our only child." He leaned his head back and spoke quietly. "She'd be thirty now." He looked back at her and the

softness in his voice was gone. “My knee and back were messed up so the fire department forced me into retirement.”

Emily covered his hand with hers. “Oh, Tag.”

He snatched his hand away. “I don’t need your pity.”

“It’s not pity. I’m very sorry that your wife and daughter died but I admire your strength. You’ve come back from injuries that would have disabled most. God has a reason for you to be here.”

Tag looked at her with an intensity that almost frightened her. “If there was a God my wife and child wouldn’t have died in the street.”

Emily stared at him, not knowing what to say. Maybe she’d gotten in too deep. It was a danger with patients. You had to distance yourself or you would feel their pain. When she looked at Tag she had a feeling for her, it was too late.

William wandered around his house, doing what little housework he could manage. He was doing his exercises, not because the doctor and the therapist told him to, but because he couldn't stand to be limited. He'd been out of the hospital for ten days and felt a damn sight better than he had in the hospital. At least he was sleeping in his own bed. He straightened up the living room and sat down with a bottle of water. The insurance company was sending someone to check on him. He hated this. It was like they thought he was an invalid. He was flipping channels when there was a knock at the door.

"Emily?"

"Hello, Tag. Can I come in?"

"Of course." He stood aside and realized how much he'd missed her smile. "What are you doing here?"

She held up a small bag. "I'm your visiting nurse."

"Excuse me?"

"I occasionally do home visits for your insurance company. Your name popped up on the list and ... I volunteered."

"No one else wanted me."

Emily laughed. "Seems like you've developed a bit of a reputation." She opened her bag and pulled out a blood pressure cuff and stethoscope. "Have a seat." She sat down next to him and placed the cuff around his arm. "How are you feeling?"

"Dandy." She stopped inflating the cuff and drilled him with a look. One thing about Emily Russo, she didn't tolerate his shit. "I'm sorry. I'm still pretty sore but I feel better than I did."

"How are you sleeping?"

"Okay, I guess. I usually get up once a night, but then I did that before surgery."

She smiled and continued taking his pressure. "Wow."

"What is it?"

“Your blood pressure is perfect, one twenty over eighty. That’s terrific.”

William gave her a small smile. “Good to know.” He was surprised considering Emily was sitting so close. She placed the stethoscope on his chest and listened. He tried not to think about the subtle scent of her shampoo.

“Could you lean forward please?” He leaned enough forward and she put the stethoscope on the right side of his back. “Deep breath, please.” She moved it to the left side. “Again, please.” She pulled back and smiled. “Your lungs are clear.” She picked up his arm and looked at her watch. “Your pulse is a little fast but not unreasonably so. Would you open your shirt? I need to examine the incision.”

He unbuttoned his shirt and thought he heard her gasp. No, it was his imagination, or wishful thinking. She looked closely at the incision. He was used to staring at it but not having anyone else look at it, especially a beautiful woman.

“It’s still raised but that’s to be expected. It will go down soon. It will take a few months for it to fade. You can put some vitamin E on it to help it heal.”

“I have a lot of scars. One more doesn’t matter.” She stared at him with a look she didn’t understand. She sat back and picked up a notebook. “You’re doing very well.” She made some notes and set it down. “If you don’t mind, I need to look around. I need to see if there are features in your home that would impair your recovery.”

“Yeah, sure.” Showing Emily around didn’t take much. Like most lake front homes it was one floor. He had a two bedrooms, one of which he used for his exercise equipment and storing his fishing gear.

“This is a nice set up. It explains why your in such good shape.”

William thought he saw her blush. “Ah, thanks.”

“That’s definitely a factor in how well you tolerated the surgery. You’re not using the equipment yet, are you?”

“Just a slow walk on the treadmill.”

“Oh, that’s fine. Nothing too strenuous, not yet.”



“Yeah, well, if I do too much I feel it.”

“That’s good. Listen to your body.” She looked at him and grinned. “It’s very smart.” She took a look in his bedroom and exited quickly. “Ah, can I see out back?”

“Sure.” He led her out the back door to his favorite part of his home, his big back yard with a view of the lake.

“Wow,” she gasped. “This is beautiful.”

He was surprised at how important her comment was to him. “Thank you. I enjoy it. We can walk down to my dock if you like.”

“Yes, please.”

He walked her down to the dock and she sat down on the wooden bench. “I can see why you’d never want to leave here. It’s so beautiful and quiet. Do you have neighbors?”

“Some, but they’re not too close. It gets busier on the weekend but it’s generally pretty quiet.”

“Do you have a boat?”

“Yeah, I have it stored.”

“Good, because you haven’t been cleared for driving and that includes your boat.”

“You said I’m fine. I’m not an invalid!”

Rather than yelling back at him, she gave his hand a squeeze. “You’re doing terrific for someone who’s only two weeks out from heart surgery. You’re ahead of most patients in recovery at this point in time. I aim to keep it that way, and that means no cars or boats. Not yet.”

“Your worse than my doctors.”

Emily smiled. “Thank you.”

William didn't understand why Emily seemed so invested in his health. But for right now, it was nice to sit on a bench with her, looking at the lake.

Emily packed her medical bag in the trunk of her car for her trip out to Tag's. She'd been going on her day off for the last three weeks. She'd grown to look forward to her visits with him and she thought he enjoyed them too. Starting on the second week he'd been serving her lunch. He was doing well in his recovery but he didn't seem to have a connection with anyone but her. His friend, Lenny, was stopping by and bringing him groceries but there didn't seem to be any one else in his life. She was afraid if she stopped visiting he'd pull in to himself. That could be a disaster for his recovery. She pulled up to his house and was surprised when Tag opened the door before she knocked. "Hi. How are you?"

"I'm okay."

She drilled him with a look. He knew better.

"I'm not hurting as much as I was. I've been doing some more exercises and it seems to be going well. But I'm sure you'll tell me if I'm doing okay."

She smiled. "Much better." She took his blood pressure and pulse. She listened to his heart and lungs. He was telling the truth. "You're doing great."

"Thanks. Lenny couldn't do a grocery run so I'm going to call for takeout for lunch. What would you like?"

"What have you got in the kitchen?"

"Not much."

She got up and headed toward his kitchen. She found some eggs and OJ and not much else. "Dang, not a vegetable in sight."

"I'm not a fan."

"I'll make you a stir fry you'll love. Now, let's go."

"Go? Go where?"

"Shopping. You can't drive yet but you can come with me while I shop for you."

“You aren’t going to let this go, are you?”

“Have you just met me?”

Tag snickered. “Fine. Let’s go but only if you let me buy lunch first.”

Emily stuck out her hand. “Deal.”

They sat down in a booth at a popular Mexican restaurant. Tag grabbed the menus and handed one to Emily. “They have the best burritos and their queso is excellent.”

She smiled. “Queso? Tag, do you want to put yourself back in the hospital?”

“Oh, come on.”

“While I don’t mind my continued employment with a constant flow of patients, I would really prefer that patient not be you. You are doing great in your recovery, but if you don’t learn to alter your diet you’ll be right back where you started.”

He sighed and put the menu down. “Fine. You’re no fun.”

She looked up over her menu. “Oh, yes I am.” She enjoyed his gasp of surprise. “How about a fajita? Grilled meat and veg, light on the shredded cheese and do you like spicy?”

“Yeah.”

“Some hot salsa.”

“Sour cream?”

“Nope.”

“Again, no fun.”

“Again, yes I am.” Her heart skipped when he chuckled and winked at her.

“Fine. We’ll do it your way.”

Emily ordered the same fajita and they both enjoyed their meal, at least she assumed so since he cleaned his meal without complaint. He paid the bill and they got back in the car.

“Go on, say it,” he said.

“Say what?”

“I told you so.”

She smiled and started the engine. “I’ll just take the win.” She glanced at the clock and swore. “I didn’t realize it was that late.”

“You can take me back to my house. I don’t want to keep you from anything.”

“No, it’s okay, so long as you don’t mind coming with me. I have one errand to run. It should only take an hour. You might actually enjoy it.”

Tag put on his seat belt. “I’ve got no where else to be.”

William was surprised when they pulled up in front of the local animal shelter. “Why here?”

“I volunteer. I walk some dogs. It gives them contact with people outside the shelter and helps the staff do other things while I do the walking. You can help me.”

“Me?”

“Are you afraid of dogs?”

“No.”

“Then let’s hop to it, Taggart.”

He followed her into the shelter where she greeted a girl at the counter. “Hey, Zoe”

“Hey, Emily. Who’s the hunk?”

“That’s Tag. He’s going to help me.”

“Okay. Allison is in the back,” she replied as she hit a buzzer. Emily opened the door and he followed her down a long hall. A petite woman with short black hair was putting a large mixed breed back in his cage.

“Hi, Emily. Who’s this?”

“William Taggart. He’s a friend of mine. Who have you got for me today?”

“Follow me.” She led them down another hall. She pointed to a large tan colored pitbull in one cage and a black puppy in the corner of the next cage. “These two came in with a seizure so they deserve some extra attention. The big girl is Taffy and the little guy is Cash. Taffy’s good but a bit hyper. She needs the exercise. Cash is a different story. He’s pretty withdrawn, although I can’t blame him.”

William noticed the scars on Cash, some more fresh than others. “What happened to him?”

“He was a bait dog,” said Allison.

“A what?”

“Dog fighting. They use smaller dogs to train the bigger ones to fight, usually to the death. Cash was lucky.”

“Lucky?”

“He survived.”

“Jesus,” he whispered. Emily grabbed a leash off the wall and reached for Taffy’s door lock. “Are you sure about this? That looks like a pretty tough dog.”

“I’m sure,” she said as she opened the cage.

“Emily is very experienced but I wouldn’t have her work with any dogs that I thought would be a problem.” Allison looked at Emily. “If you’ve got this, I’ve got to get back to it. When you’re done with Taffy, see what you can do with Cash. If we can’t reach him you know what’ll happen.”

“What do you mean?” asked William. “You won’t put him down, will you?”

“No. This is a no kill shelter but he’s a black pitbull. That’s the toughest pitbull to rehome. People are afraid of them, particularly black ones, because they look fierce. They aren’t born that way, humans make them that way. If we can get to them in time, they can have a happy life.”

“What happens if no one wants him.”

“He’ll live out his life here.”

Emily went into Taffy’s cage and hooked her on the leash. “Let’s take her first. Follow me.” They went outside and Emily let Taffy sniff the ground and trees where other dogs had been. Taffy took care of business and Emily praised and petted her. She grabbed a bag from a cleaning station. “It’s good to praise them when they go outside. It’s how they learn this is the preferable location. Let’s take her to the run.” She opened the gate to a large fenced in area and took her off the leash. Taffy immediately ran to the other end of the fence. Emily opened a box and pulled out a ball. “Let’s see if she knows how to play.”

“Knows how?”

“From the look of her she was probably kept as a breeder. She would have spent her whole life in a cage. I bet being here is the first time she’s ever seen grass.” She called the dog and she ran toward her. She showed her the ball and let her sniff it before she tossed it. Taffy ran to the ball and picked it up but she didn’t know to bring it back. William was nervous as he watched Emily take the ball from the powerful dog and toss it again. In short order Taffy had the hang of fetch. Emily tossed him the ball. “Go on, toss it.” He tossed it toward the other end of the fence and Taffy took off after it. They played with her until she started panting. “She needs some water. Let’s get her inside.”

They took Taffy back to her cage and then Emily turned her attention to Cash. He was curled up in the farthest corner of his cage. “Let’s take this slowly. Hey, Cash. How are you, baby?” she said quietly. Cash looked at her but didn’t move. She knelt down low and held out her hand, palm down. “Hi sweetie. Do you want to go outside with us?” She looked up at William. “I’m not getting anywhere. Why don’t you try?”

He knelt down and held out his hand the way Emily had. “Hi, buddy. You want to come with us?” Cash lifted his head.

“Keep going,” she whispered.

“Do you want to come play?” Cash pulled himself up on all fours. He edged close to William and sniffed his hand. He glanced at Emily who was smiling. He looked at Cash and wondered how anyone could torture this puppy. He risked putting his hand on the dog’s head and giving him a pet. Cash rolled his head into his hand and William scratched behind his ear. He remembered how his old beagle liked that. Funny. He hadn’t thought about Butch in decades but that dog had been his best friend when he was kid. Cash was staring at him, tilting his head, as if he was trying to understand him. Before he realized it Cash crawled up in his lap.

“Well, what do you know?” said Emily. She stood and held the leash. “Why don’t you pick him up and we’ll get him outside. She hooked the leash on Cash’s collar but William didn’t set him down. He seemed too comfortable on his shoulder.

“Come on, buddy. Let’s go outside.” He smiled when Cash licked his cheek.



Cash struggled against the leash but Emily showed William a few tricks. When Cash peed on the grass William remembered to praise him. They took him into the fenced in area and Emily picked a toy that would fit his smaller mouth. William tried to get him to fetch the toy but Cash was only interested in belly rubs.

They played with him until it was time to take him back. Instead of letting him walk, William carefully picked him up, avoiding his most current injuries. He'd like to find the bastards that did this to Cash and make them bait dogs. As they returned Cash to his cage, Allison walked toward them.

"Oh my gosh! He let you carry him!"

"He's a good boy," said William. Emily opened the cage door and William set him down. At least he tried. Cash wasn't having it. He pulled at William's pant leg. Apparently he wanted him to stay in his cage with him. He managed to free his leg and closed the door. Cash sat down at the cage door and began to bark.

"That's new," said Allison. "He must like you."

William stared at the little puppy and knew this was trouble. He needed to get out of here.

"Emily, I have a thought. What do you think about fostering?" she asked.

"You know I would, Allison, but you know my work schedule wouldn't allow me to give them enough time."

"No, I'm thinking William."

"What? Me? No."

"You've seemed to have connected with Cash. Just a couple of weeks would make a huge difference in his development. Normally I wouldn't suggest it to someone I don't know but if Emily thinks it would work, I'd trust her judgment."

He looked to Emily for backup. "All things considered that's probably not a good idea."

Emily rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. You’re strong as a bull moose.” So much for backup. He felt her hand on his shoulder. “I’m not trying to push you into anything. But you could make a real difference in whether he gets adopted or whether he spends his life in a cage.”

Now it was his turn to roll his eyes. “Yeah, no pressure.” He looked down at Cash who’d moved from barking to whining. “Just a couple of weeks?”

“Once he’s learned a few commands and he’s housebroken he’ll be much easier to adopt out.”

“I’ve never trained a dog.”

“I’ll show you,” said Emily.

He looked at her and saw the look in her eyes. She knew she had him. Damn her. He looked at Cash who was “Fine. Just a couple of weeks.”

Emily couldn't believe Tag agreed to take the puppy. She hoped she hadn't pushed too hard. He was sitting in the front seat holding Cash and pretending he wasn't having a great time with wiggling puppy. She pulled into the pet store parking lot. "Come on. We'll get some supplies for your house guest."

"We can't leave him in the car."

"Of course not but this is the one store he'll be welcome."

Emily tried not to grin as Tag walked Cash up and down the aisles. She grabbed a cart and picked out a large bag of puppy food. They walked up the aisle with the beds and crates. "We should pick out one of these." Tag pulled out a large plush bed and set it on the floor.

"What do you think, boy?" Cash sniffed round the bed before laying down. "I think we have a winner."

"We should get him a crate too."

"I thought the idea was to get him used to being outside of a cage."

"It is, but as a puppy he's insatiably curious. This will protect your house from him and him from your house. When he's tired or wants to get away from people he'll probably go in on his own." They picked out a larger crate, taking into account how fast he would grow.

"I should get some toys for him."

"It's a good idea. It will keep him occupied." They walked up the aisle with toys and Cash sniffed his brains out. Tag was showing Cash a squeaky bone when a mother and a little boy walked up the aisle. The boy tried to pet the puppy and his mother pulled him back.

"No, Scotty, don't touch," said the mother as she pulled him into the next aisle.

"What was that? He's just a puppy." asked Tag.

“That’s what I mean. People will assume he’s bad news because of how he looks. That’s what Cash is facing.” Since Emily had maneuvered Tag into taking Cash home she tried to pay for the supplies. He wouldn’t have it.

“I said I would take care of him.”

Once again she tried to hide her smile.

They pulled into the grocery store lot and Emily parked. “I’ll leave the air on. It shouldn’t take me too long.”

“You don’t have to do this. Lenny will be by soon.”

“Yeah well, you have nothing in your fridge. I’ll get enough food for a couple of days. You stay here with Cash.”

“Since I know I can’t change your mind, take this.” He opened his wallet and handed her two hundred dollars.

“Fine,” she smiled before she reached over and petted Cash’s head. “Try not to cause any trouble.”

“He’ll be fine.”

She looked at him and winked. “I wasn’t talking to the dog.”

William carried in the groceries while Emily watched Cash. He couldn't believe how much she'd bought. Bags and bags and not a pork rind in any of them. She seemed determined to turn him into a rabbit. After the groceries were unpacked they hooked Cash up to his new leash and took him outside. Cash walked around and christened several trees in his new backyard.

"Cash has had a busy day. Let's set up his crate and feed him," said Emily. "I'm off tomorrow so I can come back then to show you some training. We don't want to wear him out."

"Sounds good." He opened up the crate box and set it up in the spare bedroom. He dished out some food and set it in the crate. Cash followed the bowl and wolfed down his meal, a sure sign of not being sure when he would get the next meal. He circled around his bed and laid down.

"Well, it looks like he's ready for a nap," said Emily.

"Guess so. Would you like something to drink?"

"Sure. I hope I didn't drag you around too much today." They sat down at the kitchen table with ice teas.

"No, I feel fine."

"You look fine," she smiled. "But that's not always an indicator," she quickly added.

William thought he saw her blush. No. He was imagining it.

"When is your next checkup with your surgeon?"

"Monday at three. Lenny is taking me."

"Oh, that's good. I'm working."

"Speaking of working I wanted to show you something." He got up from the kitchen and grabbed some mail. "I got this statement from my insurance company. It's about your visits. The first one is listed but none of the others are. You must be wondering why they haven't paid you. I'll call the insurance company."

“You don’t have to do that.”

“You’ve worked hard taking care of me. You should be paid.”

She sighed, “Don’t call them.”

“Why? I don’t mind.”

“Because it’s not a mistake.”

“What?”

She stared at her glass. “The insurance company checks on patients who live alone. They sent me to make sure your home didn’t pose an impediment to your recovery. It doesn’t. I turned in my report after the first visit.” She stood and reached for her bag. “I should go. There’s plenty of good food in the fridge now.” She turned to leave and he took her hand to stop her.

“Emily, why?” He was surprised when she turned back and there were tears in her eyes. “Tell me why.”

“You know why,” she whispered.

“No, I don’t.”

“You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?”

“I want to know.”

“Damn,” she whispered. She took a breath and looked at him. “I wanted to make sure you took care of yourself. I wanted you to feel better.”

“Do you suspect a problem?”

She shook her head and looked away. “You’re tough as nails. I knew you’d be fine after the first visit. I’m sure your doctor will clear you for driving and normal activity on Monday.”

He put his hand to her cheek and forced her to look at him. “Then why?”

“Because you may pretend to be a miserable cus but I like being around you.”

“Emily, I’m just an old man.” He saw her embarrassment turn to frustration.

“You keep saying that like saying it makes it true. It’s not. You are a strong, vital man.” A tear ran down her cheek. “You’re also incredibly handsome and you have the most beautiful blue eyes I’ve ever seen.”

He brushed the tear from her cheek. “Emily, I couldn’t imagine a woman like you would be interested in someone like me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Someone so beautiful.”

She smiled. “You think I’m beautiful?”

He chuckled. “I’m old, not dead. I thought so the moment I woke up in the hospital. I wondered if you saw I was staring. And if we’re being honest, I looked forward to your shift when you came on duty. It’s probably why I gave you such a hard time when you had to do anything...personal for me.”

“Like checking out your ass while I put on the extra gown as a bathrobe.”

This time he laughed. “You were checking out my ass?”

“I’m old, not dead,” she smiled. She took a step back. “I wasn’t very professional. I’ve been a nurse for thirty years. I should know better. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not,” he said before he pulled her into a gentle kiss. He pulled back and she smiled slipping her hands around his neck. He pulled her close and kissed her the way he’d thought about for the last six weeks. “Emily, I... it’s been a long while.” He could feel the heat of his blush. He felt like a fool.

“Tag, it’s been a long while for me too.”

“I’m not sure...”

“Tag, do you want to be with me?”

“Yes, very much.”

“I want to be with you.” She placed a soft hand on his chest. “Trust me.”

He took her hand and led him to his bedroom. Emily kissed him again before beginning to unbutton his shirt. She slipped it off his shoulders and smiled. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to do.”

“Feel free,” he smiled. He gasped when she ran her fingers lightly over his shoulders and down his arms. She made a noise like she’d had a good meal.

“I felt so guilty when you were my patient and I wanted to do this.”

“I’m not your patient anymore.”

“No,” she grinned. “No, you’re not.”

“Good, because I’m about to do this.” He slipped his hands under her shirt and pushed it over her head. His breath caught. She must work out a lot because she was incredibly fit. “Wow,” he whispered.

“Why, thank you,” she grinned. She ran her hands down his chest to his waist. “You’re pretty ‘Wow’ yourself.” He self consciously touched his incision. She kissed him lightly. “Don’t worry. I’ll be careful.”

“It’s not that.”

“What is it? You don’t have to hide anything from me.”

“I’m pretty beat up. My leg, my back, now my chest, I look like a roadmap.”

“Do you think I don’t find you physically attractive?” She shook her head and smiled. She pushed him back to sit on the bed. She kept his gaze as she kicked off her shoes and slipped off her jeans. He gasped when she stood in front of him wearing nothing but the smallest of panties and bra. Women half her age would kill for her figure.

“So beautiful,” he whispered.

“Thank you,” she smiled as she slipped off her lingerie. William thought he’d lost his mind. Emily put her legs on either side of his and sat in his lap. “If you can’t believe



this,” she said as she gave him a passionate kiss. “Believe this.” She took his hand from her waist and slipped it between her legs.

“Damn,” he gasped before he flipped her over on the bed. He got out of his clothes faster than he had ever done getting ready for a fire. The part of his brain that still had rational thought was ridiculously pleased as she looked at him up and down and gasped. He covered her with his body as he pulled her into a passionate kiss. A sharp pain in his incision reminded him he wasn’t as healed as he thought. Emily ran her hand through his beard.

“Let me,” she whispered as she pushed him on his back. She traveled the length of him kissing and nipping down his chest to his waist. She tormented him with her mouth until she rose up over him. “Tag, I want you.” He took her hips in his hands and guided himself into her. He thought he lose his mind in her heat. She balanced herself on his shoulders until she threw her head back and groaned his name. Her passion sent him over the edge.

Emily curled up next to him and he wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “Oh God, Tag. You feel so good.”

He kissed her forehead. “So do you.” He ran his hand down her waist. “Do you run? You’re in amazing shape.”

“Thank you. I do run a bit. I do some free weights.” She ran her hands over his waist. “You keep very fit.”

He brushed his free hand over his chest. “Yeah, well.”

Emily leaned up on her elbow. “You’re in great shape. That’s why you’re recovering so quickly. You probably have a genetic predisposition to heart issues. All you have to do is modify your diet. You’ll be fine.”

“No more pork rinds.”

“No more pork rinds,” she smiled.

“You’re no fun,” he chuckled.

“I beg to differ. I believe I proved I’m quite a lot of fun.”

“I stand corrected,” he smiled just before pulling her into a passionate kiss.

Emily moved around the kitchen chopping vegetables and smiling. She knew she shouldn't get too invested. Tag had a lot of baggage. She pushed him into taking Cash. She hoped she hadn't pushed him into sex. She smiled when she thought about them together. He was as passionate as she'd imagined. She giggled when she thought of his beard tickling her skin.

Tag had dominated her thoughts for the last six weeks. She'd been terrified to start something. She wasn't good at relationships. If she was she wouldn't still be single at fifty four. She wasn't sure what would happen. The only thing she was sure of was if she didn't try, she'd regret it for the rest of her life.

"Hey there."

Emily looked up to see Tag standing in the doorway. He'd thrown on a pair of shorts and a t shirt. She loved the evil glint in his eyes. She'd only bothered with her t shirt and panties. "Well, hey there." He pulled her into his arms, rubbing his hands down her back and cupped her ass.

"What are you doing?"

"Dinner." She gave him a quick kiss. "Someone made me hungry."

"You're going to a lot of trouble."

"It's not that much trouble. I'm making oven fried chicken, some steamed veg and roasted potatoes. You can make the salad."

"Okay." He opened the fridge and pulled out a bag of lettuce and a tomato.

"Just okay? You're not going to grouse about the food?"

He put the food on the counter and grabbed some bowls. "You had me at fried chicken."

"Oven fried but I guarantee you'll like it."

It had been a long time since William sat across the table from a woman, especially after a few hours of passionate sex. Being with a woman like Emily had never crossed his mind. He never thought it possible. Being with Emily wouldn't be just friends with benefits. It couldn't be. This would be a real relationship. He didn't even know if he wanted this. He hadn't had a real relationship since Anna died. He watched as Emily dished out the vegetables to his plate. She looked up and noticed he was staring.

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm watching a beautiful woman trying to get me to eat my veggies." He was rewarded with a bright blush.

"If you finish your veggies you'll get dessert."

"I need to know what's worth peas and carrots. What's for dessert?"

She gave him a deliciously wicked look. "Me."

They took Cash outside after dinner for a long walk. It had been a hell of a day. First taking in a dog, even if it was for only a few weeks. Then, Emily. He felt like he wasn't inside his own life anymore. Everything had changed and he wasn't sure he wanted it. He sure as hell didn't deserve a woman like her.

"Are you listening?" she asked.

"I'm sorry. What?"

"I said I wouldn't let him off lead just yet. It looks like there's a lot of woods back here but I wouldn't want him to run off and scare the neighbors."

"No neighbors, at least not for some distance."

"Really?"

"I like the quiet. When I first bought up here it wasn't quite as developed as it is now. I have ten acres so Cash could run for a while and not find another person."

Emily smiled. "Nice. I still would keep a close eye on him."

“I will.”

“Let’s take him in. He’s had a busy day.”

They took Cash inside but he wasn’t ready to sleep just yet. Free from his crate, Cash ran through all the rooms checking out the house. He slid on the hardwood floor and his legs flew out from under him. “Come here, buddy,” he laughed. He scooped up the puppy and sat down on the couch. Emily sat down next to him and Cash jumped into her lap. She laughed as the puppy covered her face in kisses.

“Should I be jealous?” he asked.

She gave him a sly look. “Maybe. I always did have a thing for the tall, dark and handsome types.”

William reached over and pet the dog. “Well, we’re both pretty beat up.” He looked at Cash’s scars, older and newer. “What kind of bastard does this?”

“The worst kind. Unfortunately, I’ve seen this too often. What always amazes me is how a dog who’s been through so much can still be so loving.”

“What do you say I give him one of those bones we got him and put him to bed? Like you said, it’s been a long day for him.” William picked up the puppy and put him in his crate. Emily handed him a small green bone and he pushed it through the bars of the crate. Cash took the bone, curled up and began to happily chomp away. William turned off the light but left the door open, leaving in some light from the hall. He closed his eyes for a moment, suddenly remembering doing the same thing for Kathy when she was a baby.

“Tag, are you okay?”

“What? Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just hoping Cash will be okay.”

Emily took his hand in hers. “I’m sure he’ll be fine.” She pulled him away from the spare bedroom. “I believe someone was promised dessert.”

He smiled. “Well, I did eat all my veggies.”

William stirred and realized there was a small arm over his chest. His chest was a little sore but he had to admit Emily was worth it. He rubbed his hand down her arm. He glanced over and he thought his heart would stop. He wasn't seeing a brunette with brown eyes. He saw blonde hair, blue eyes and a very familiar smile. "Anna," he whispered.

Emily stirred in his arms. "Huh?" she asked as she opened her eyes.

He blinked and his vision cleared. He saw Emily looking very confused. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay. We should probably get Cash out for a walk. Then we can feed all of us."

"Good plan. I'll get Cash out." He jumped out of the bed and threw his boxers and jeans. He grabbed the leash and found Cash on his feet and wagging his tail. "Hey buddy. Did you have a good sleep?" He hooked the leash on to his collar and led him out the back door. Cash sniffed the grounds and marked several trees. He let Cash lead the way down the path to the lake. Cash tried to yank William down toward the water as the dog tried to chase after some geese. He tried to correct him despite his laughter. "No Cash. Leave the birds alone." Cash gave him a look that said "Ahhh...come on."

"Sorry. It's not acceptable behavior." He pet the dog's head and sighed. "Talk about not acceptable. I hope she didn't hear me." He sat down on the bench and Cash put his head in William's lap. He scratched behind the dog's ear. "What am I going to do?"

"What am I going to do?" Emily thought. She moved around the kitchen, setting the table. "He called me Anna. I guess it's normal, especially if he's spent a lot of time alone. He booked out of the bedroom so fast. Have I made a huge mistake?" She shook her head. "What am I going to do?" she said.

"About what?"

She turned to see Tag standing in the doorway. "About breakfast. I'm trying to decide what to make for breakfast."

“How about you pour the juice and I’ll make breakfast.”

“Okay,” she smiled and grabbed the juice from the fridge. This was ridiculous. She was too old to play silly games. She set the juice down and took his hand. “Are you okay?”

He smiled and put his arms around her waist. “I’m fine,” he smiled and gave her a quick kiss. “How are you?”

“I’m good.”

“Then what’s got you so worried?”

“Did I push you, you know, last night?”

“No sweetheart. Nothing happened last night that I didn’t want.”

She took a breath and looked him in the eyes. “You called me Anna.”

“You heard me.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry, Emily. It slipped out.”

“Am I like her?”

Tag snickered. “No, you’re nothing like her. She was shy.”

Emily picked up the juice and started to pour in the glasses. “Well, no one’s ever accused me of that.”

He took the bottle from her hand and set it down. He pulled her into his arms. “I promise, I’m not comparing you to her. I’m sorry if I upset you.”

“I can’t be her.”

“I don’t want you to be. I like who you are.”

“Thank you. I like who you are too.”

They spent the rest of the day with Cash as Emily showed William how to teach the dog basic commands. He was pleased at how quickly Cash picked up on the commands.

“He seems pretty clever,” he said.

“He does. I think he’s food motivated. That will help with training,” she smiled. “Just don’t run out of treats.” Cash’s ears perked up at the word. “Uh oh. It looks like he’s learned the word.”

William handed Cash a treat. “Good boy.” He smiled at Emily. “Would you like to walk down to the lake? He seems to like it down there.”

“Sure. Let’s go.” A few minutes later they walked toward the bench by his dock. They sat down as Cash sniffed at the water’s edge. “It’s so pretty here,” she said.

“I like it. Cash does too.”

“He may be the size of a beagle but he’s still just a baby. Everything is new to him.” She smiled at him. “New things can be good.”

William took her hand in his. “Yes they can.” He leaned in to give her a kiss when they spotted someone coming through the trees. It was, Rich, a neighbor from across the lake. Unfortunately, he also had with him his German Shepard.

“Hey, William. I didn’t know you had a dog.”

“Hi, Rich. I’m just fostering him.” He looked down at Cash, who was now wedged between his feet and whining. “Cash, buddy. It’s okay. That’s Blitz. He’s a good boy.” Blitz spotted the puppy and rushed to greet him. Cash backed up so quickly the leash slipped from William’s hand. Before he could grab the leash, Cash disappeared into the woods.



William tried to chase after Cash, but he didn't have the strength to catch a five month old puppy. He leaned against a tree and tried to catch his breath. Emily caught up to him and grabbed his arm.

"Are you insane? You just had heart surgery. No fucking running!"

"I have to find him."

"We will. Now catch your breath. Did you bring the treats?"

William pulled them out of his pocket. "Yeah."

"Good. Now, let's walk in the direction he went. Instead of calling, just listen for him. If you see him don't chase him. Hold up the treats, shake the bag and walk in the other direction. Cash is food motivated. He should follow."

He nodded and walked through the woods, looking for anything that would indicate Cash had been through here. He saw a long streak in a patch of dirt and waved Emily over. "Look."

"His leash," she smiled.

They followed the trail for a few minutes until they heard some whining. William's heart beat faster when he saw Cash trying to pull his leash free from around a tree. "Hey buddy," he said quietly. Cash cried and pulled harder.

"He's scared of me."

"No. He's scared in general. Approach him slowly with the treats. I'll grab the leash so he doesn't pull away."

"Look what I have," he said as he held the treat out to Cash. William moved closer until he got a stronger whiff. He was surprised when Cash's tongue shot out and took the treat. "That's better, isn't it?" He pulled out another treat and handed it to him. Emily unwrapped the leash and tried to hand it to him. "Maybe you better hold it."

She looked confused but handed him the loop. "No, you take it."

He took the leash from her and wrapped it around his wrist. Then he picked up Cash and held him to his chest. He kissed the whimpering dog's head. "It's okay. You're safe now." They walked the few minutes back to his house and Emily closed the door behind them. They turned on the kitchen light and Emily spotted blood on his shirt.

"He's hurt. Set him down, I'll get my bag."

William sat down on the floor and held Cash tight to him. He looked at Cash's flank and found a bleeding gash. "Damn." Emily sat down next to him and opened her bag. He pointed to the gash. "He's cut here." She pulled out some gauze and a bottle of antiseptic. She dabbed it on him and he squealed. "You're hurting him."

"No, I'm not. The cut may be sore but I'm not adding to it." She took a close look at the wound. It's not that deep. It will heal quick. She laid Cash on the floor and examined the rest of his body. "I'm not seeing anything else. He'll be fine."

He stood up and looked for his keys. "Maybe we should take him to the vet."

Emily stood and took his hand. Cash stood and stared at him. "Tag, calm down. He's fine." He pointed to the tail wagging dog. "See."

"I can't do this," he said.

"Do what?"

"He was hurt and it's my fault. I couldn't chase after him. I can't do this. It's too much."

"What are you talking about? He has a scratch. It's not a big deal."

"Yes it is. It's a very big deal. I'm not equipped for this. It's all too much, too many problems."

Emily dropped his hand and looked him in the eyes. "You're not talking about Cash, are you?" She shook her head and grabbed her bag. "Well, William...you made a commitment to him. Two weeks. Walking him, cleaning up after him, teaching him the basics. You are more than physically capable of living up to your commitment." She reached for her purse. "If you have any problems with training, call me, because I

promised to help you. I don't live far, over on Patterson, so I can be here quickly." She headed toward the front door.

"Emily, wait."

"Why? You made a commitment to Cash, not to me. I'm nobody's problem."

Emily closed the door behind her and William thought he may have made a huge mistake.

William didn't sleep well. Neither did Cash. He finally took the dog out of his crate at two a.m. and brought him into his bedroom. He tried to get him to sleep on the sheepskin blanket he'd bought for him. That lasted about a minute. As soon as William got into bed, Cash jumped up on the bed and curled up next to him. He was supposed to be training Cash to be independent but having him curled up against his side seemed to calm him. Cash leaned up toward William's face and licked his cheek. He'd never tell anyone that he kissed the dog's forehead in return.

He took Cash out early in the morning and ran him through his paces. He seemed to be catching on to basic commands very quickly. He was very concerned about his fear of other dogs. As Cash ate his breakfast, William called his neighbor. "Hey, Rich."

"Hey William. I'm so sorry about yesterday. Blitz was just being friendly."

"I know that. I'm fostering Cash. He was rescued from a dog fighting ring."

"Ah, Christ. That explains why he was afraid."

"I'm trying to get him so he can be adopted. I have a thought. What about your wife's dog. She's little."

"Chloe? Yeah, she's a shi tzu mix. She's a real love bug."

"I'd like to ask you a favor. Do you think maybe you could bring her over some time? Maybe Cash could get used to her and work his way up to Blitz."

"Sure. I'd be happy to."

"Great. I appreciate that. You talk to Kathy and I'll call back about a time."

William jumped into the shower and got ready for his appointment. He was hoping Emily was right and the doctor would clear him to drive. Being dependent on anyone went against his grain. He stared in the mirror as he brushed out his hair and beard. Emily. What else was she right about? Seeing Anna unnerved him. Why would he see her? His pain meds were over the counter so it wasn't that. He wasn't someone who believed in ghosts. But for a brief moment, he was in bed with his wife. The knock at the door startled him and Cash.

“You got a dog?” Lenny walked in and pet Cash.

“I’m fostering him for two weeks. I’m getting him ready to be adopted.” Lenny was staring at him. “What?”

“You. You’re training a dog?”

“Yes, me. What’s so odd about that?”

“I’ve known you thirty years. You’ve never expressed an interest in any dog, let alone training one.”

“I like dogs.”

“Uh, huh.”

“Let me get him in his crate and we can get going.” William led Cash to his crate and handed him a green treat bone through the bars. “I’ll be back in a little bit, boy.” Cash looked up briefly and went right back to his bone. He walked back to the living room and found Lenny was standing there with a smile he didn’t like. He was wiggling one of Emily’s ponytail holders in his fingers.

“Who is she?”

“Excuse me?”

“I have a wife and two daughters, all with long hair. I know what this is.”

“What it is, is none of your business. Let’s go. I don’t want to be late.”

William looked out the window as Lenny drove him to his appointment. He met Lenny when they were at the fire academy together. He’d been at his wedding when he married Elaine. Lenny had been one of his groomsmen when he married Anna. He deserved better from him. Even though he’d been a total ass to him, Lenny wouldn’t push. “Her name is Emily.”

“Where did you meet her?”

“She was my nurse. The insurance company sent her to the house to check up on me.”

“And?”

“She checked on me every week, even though the insurance company only paid her for one week.”

“She’s the one who got you to take the dog.”

“Yeah.”

“So, she likes you.”

“Yeah.”

“And you like her.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll hazard a guess that more has gone on than the checking your vital signs.”

“Yeah,” he said quietly.

“Why is that a problem?” Lenny pulled into the hospital parking garage.

“I...you’ll think I’m crazy.”

“I’ve seen you run into a burning building after a victim when the building was about to blow. That crazy train left the station a long time ago. So tell me.”

“I saw Anna.” William was surprised when Lenny didn’t laugh in his face.

“When did you see her?”

“Sunday morning. I woke up and when I looked over at Emily I saw Anna. She was smiling at me.”

“How long did it last?”

“Just a moment, but not before I called her Anna.”

“Oh boy. What did Emily say?”

“She asked me if Anna was like her. I told her no and that it just slipped out. I told her I wasn’t comparing her to Anna.”

“Was she okay with that?”

“It seems so.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Emily couldn’t be just a casual thing.”

“And I ask again, what’s the problem?”

“I’m obviously not cut out for that. I haven’t had a serious relationship in fifteen years and when I do I see my dead wife. That’s crazy. I can’t do it.” He reached for the door but Lenny hit the locks. “Hey.”

“Look, William, I don’t meddle, you know that.”

“One of your best qualities, now open the door.”

“Yeah, well, I’m about to meddle. You and Anna were great together. High school sweethearts that made it work. You loved each other, everyone could see it and you both adored Kathy. You had the dream. Then it turned into a nightmare. They were gone and you were left alone. You’ve spent the last fifteen years essentially alone and that’s a crappy way to live. Now you’ve met this woman, Emily. She’s obviously seen you at your worst because you’re a terrible patient.”

“Hey!”

“Thirty years of history, buddy. I get to call you on your crap. So Emily has seen you at your worst but she cares anyway. And you care too. If you didn’t you wouldn’t be so snappy about it.”

“I never expected to meet anyone like her.”

“But you did and it’s got you turned in knots.”

“That’s for sure.”

“Maybe you did see Anna.”

“What? You’re crazier than I am.”

“I know you don’t go to church anymore but Elaine and I do. Maybe Anna was there. Maybe she was telling you it was okay.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Okay, maybe it is. Or maybe you saw her because being with Anna was the last time you were this happy. Growling and telling me off, not withstanding.”

He looked at Lenny. He was his best friend, maybe his only real friend. He’d stood by him through the worst times in his life. In all that time he’d never let him down. William didn’t know how he’d put up with him all these years. He held out his hand and Lenny took it.

“Thank you. For everything.”

“You’re welcome.” Lenny unlocked the doors. “Now, let’s get you cleared by your doctor. The chauffeur business isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Shut up,” he chuckled.



Emily tried to push Tag out of her mind and failed. She should have known better than to get involved. He'd never gotten over the death of his wife and his daughter, not that she blamed him. It was a horrible thing to go through. But she couldn't play second fiddle to a dead woman. She had too much respect for herself and it wouldn't be fair to Tag. Death often deified the departed, blurring the line between reality and memory. She could never compare to an angel. She would never try.

The clock read four p.m. Tag should be done with checkup. She could look into his chart for any updates, but that would be unprofessional, no matter how much she wanted to know. He hadn't called her since she walked out yesterday. The only thing she could assume was Cash was okay. If he wasn't Tag would have called her. She grabbed her cart and started making her rounds. She'd focus on her patients. If she didn't she'd start crying, again.

William looked in the mirror and adjusted his jacket. He'd thought about calling Emily but he was afraid after a week she wouldn't take his call. He knew she had weekends off and she mentioned she lived on Patterson. It wasn't that big a street. He'd drive up and down the street until he found her car. There couldn't be that many cars with a registered nurse bumper sticker. He hoped the flowers he'd bought would soften his sudden appearance and the possibility of seeming like a stalker. Now all he had to was find her.

An hour later he sat outside her house. He hadn't been this nervous about a woman in, well, in forever. He and Anna had known each other since they were kids. A relationship with Emily would be a totally different experience. That is if she didn't slam the door in his face. He'd never know until he got his ass out of the car. He took a deep breath and knocked. He was glad she at least opened the door.

"William, what are you doing here?"

"May I come in?"

She nodded and stood aside. He handed her the flowers. “ Thank you. How did you find me?”

“You said you lived on Patterson. I drove around until I saw your car. I recognized your bumper sticker.”

“Why are you here, William? Is Cash okay?”

“He’s fine. Actually, he’s great. I was hoping you’d like to come visit him. And I thing I like it when you call me Tag.” He followed her into the kitchen where she found a vase for the flowers.

“They’re lovely.” She set them on her dining room table. “Now do you want to tell me why you’re really here?”

“Because I wasn’t sure if you’d take my call.”

“I told you I’d help you with Cash.”

“I’m not talking about Cash.” He took her hand. “I’m sorry, Emily. I’ve handled this badly. I’ve been by myself for so long that I’ve gotten set in my ways. But I’ve realized for the first time in years, I care something, someone other than myself.” He brush his hand across her cheek. “Would you please consider giving this miserable cus another chance?” His released the breath he didn’t know he was holding when Emily smiled.

“Yes. That would make me very happy.”

“Thank God,” He grinned before he pulled her into a passionate kiss.

William pulled up to his house and they went inside. He was very excited to show Emily the progress Cash had made. How much they’d both made. “Let me get Cash. I know he’ll be happy to see you.” He opened the cage and Cash went into full body wag. The dog was always so happy to see him. “Go get Emily.” Cash turned his head and then bolted down the hall. “Incoming!” he called. Emily laughed as she pet the excited dog.

“Hey, boy. It’s good to see you too.”

“Okay, buddy, let’s show her your stuff.” Cash turned to William. “Cash, sit.” The dog planted his bottom on the floor. “Down,” he said as he moved his hand. The dog laid at his feet. He moved his hand from his side to his waist. “Up.” Cash got to his feet. William turn his hand in a circle and Cash followed. He reached into his pocket and handed him a treat.

“That’s wonderful. I’m very impressed,” said Emily.

“Thanks. I’ve been working with Rich, the guy who owns the German Shepard. He’s trained his dogs. We’ve been working on Cash’s fear of dogs. He has a little dog, Chloe.” Cash barked at the mention of the dog’s name. “Cash recognizes her name. He likes going to play with her. He’s still a bit shy around Blitz, the Shepard, but we’re working on it.”

“That’s amazing, Tag. You’ve made great progress with him in a very short time.”

“Well, I didn’t have anything else to do but train him and think about this great girl I was missing.”

Emily wrapped her arms around his waist. “What’s her name so I can kick her ass.”

He gave her a soft kiss. “There’s only you.”

“Good to know,” she grinned. Cash barked at not being the center of attention.

“Cash, down.” The dog obeyed.

“You really have a knack for this, Tag. You’ve made it much easier for Cash to find a permanent home.”

“Ahh, about that.” He looked down at Cash. The dog looked at him with such warm eyes that he would like to call it love. The dog could sense his moods. Cash put his head in his lap while he was watching TV. He crawled into bed with him when he had trouble sleeping, which was every night. When Cash was frightened of a new task he looked to William for guidance. Cash trusted him. “I..uhh..I..”

“You don’t want to give him back.”

“No, I don’t. Now that he’s housebroken and he’s pretty much behaved so he’s no trouble.”

Emily smiled. “And you like having him around.”

“I like having him around.”

“It’s called a foster fail, when you grow so attached to your foster you don’t want to give him up. It won’t be a problem. I’ll be your reference at the shelter.” She reached down and pet Cash’s head. “I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“Why not?”

“Some things are meant to be.”

William smiled and pulled her into a deep kiss. “Yeah, they are.” They were interrupted when Cash ran to the back door and barked. “He has to go out. Mood killer!” They walked the dog in his back yard. William had the leash in one hand and Emily’s hand in the other. It was so peaceful. Emily smiled as the dog sniffed every blade of grass from the back door to the dock. Then he saw them.

He saw two people standing on the dock. Two women. They turned around and William froze. It was his Kathy. Behind her was Anna with her arms wrapped around her daughter. They both looked at him and smiled. He smiled back and in the next heartbeat they were gone. He closed his eyes to hold the moment close. When he opened his eyes he felt lighter than he’d felt in fifteen years.

“Tag? Tag? Are you okay? Is everything alright?”

He leaned in and gave her a kiss. “Everything is how it was meant to be.”