

Rescuing Christmas



New York Times Bestselling Author

Vicki Lewis Thompson

USA TODAY Bestselling Authors

Catherine Mann & Kathie DeNosky

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Christmas*



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For three couples, this is the season...to give, to heal, to love.

***Holiday Haven* by Vicki Lewis Thompson**

All Ben Rhodes wants for Christmas is to be left alone. And yet, in a fit of Christmas-cheer-induced insanity, he agrees to help beautiful shelter director Tansy Dexter find homes for all her rambunctious animals. Little does he know that the one truly in need of a loving home this season...is him.

***Home for Christmas* by Catherine Mann**

Shelby Conrad has had more than her fair share of silent nights. But even though her husband, Tech Sergeant Alex Conrad, is coming home in time for Christmas, Shelby isn't sure he's in time to save their marriage. Can a road trip to deliver three shelter dogs to their new homes teach the couple that the most precious gift of all is hope?

***A Puppy for Will* by Kathie DeNosky**

Will Parker hasn't exactly had all his hopes and dreams met, but work has filled the gaps in his life. Or so he thinks...until an energetic and large Saint Bernard foster puppy and Will's cute neighbor Macie Fairbanks introduce him to the best thing about Christmas and life—unconditional love.

Praise for *New York Times* bestselling author Vicki Lewis Thompson

“Vicki Lewis Thompson is one of those rare, gifted writers with the ability to touch her readers’ hearts and their funny bones.”

—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author
Debbie Macomber

“Ms. Thompson does a wonderful job of blending the erotic with romance that is sometimes tender, sometimes funny and always exciting.”

—Diana Riso, *Romance Reviews Today*

Praise for *USA TODAY* bestselling author Catherine Mann

“Catherine Mann delivers a powerful, passionate read not to be missed!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Lori Foster

“Catherine Mann certainly knows how to reach your heart through her characters.”

—*Fresh Fiction Reviews*
on *Honorable Intentions*

Praise for *USA TODAY* bestselling author Kathie DeNosky

“[Kathie] DeNosky traces the steps of a marital breakdown with delicacy and understanding.”

—*RT Book Reviews*
on *His Marriage to Remember*

“DeNosky’s keen touch with family drama and enduring love makes for a great read.”

—*RT Book Reviews*
on *Expecting the Rancher’s Heir*

VICKI LEWIS THOMPSON

New York Times bestselling author Vicki Lewis Thompson's love affair with cowboys started with the Lone Ranger, continued through Maverick and took a turn south of the border with Zorro. She views cowboys as the Western version of knights in shining armor—rugged men who value honor, honesty and hard work. Fortunately for her, she lives in the Arizona desert, where broad-shouldered, lean-hipped cowboys abound. Blessed with such an abundance of inspiration, she only hopes that she can do them justice. Visit her website at www.vickilewisthompson.com.

CATHERINE MANN

USA TODAY bestselling author and RITA® Award winner Catherine Mann lives in the Florida panhandle with her flyboy husband, their four children, three dogs and one cat (who thinks he's a dog). The Mann family has fostered more than fifty puppies and special needs dogs for their local Humane Society, where Catherine serves on the Board of Directors. More information on Catherine Mann, her work and her adventures in pet fostering can be found online at her website, catherinemann.com, on Facebook (CatherineMannAuthor) and Twitter (CatherineMann1).

KATHIE DeNOSKY

lives in her native southern Illinois on the land her family settled in 1839. She writes highly sensual stories with a generous amount of humor; her books have appeared on the *USA TODAY* bestseller list and received numerous awards, including two National Readers' Choice Awards. Kathie enjoys going to rodeos, traveling to research settings for her books and listening to country music. Readers may contact her by emailing kathie@kathiedenis.com. They can also visit her website, www.kathiedenis.com, or find her on Facebook.

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Thanks to my animal-loving anthology mates,

Kathie DeNosky and Catherine Mann,

for making this project so rewarding.

Thanks, also, to the hardworking volunteers at shelters all over the world, as we look forward to a time
of no more homeless pets.

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CHAPTER ONE

ON MOST DAYS, BEN RHODES enjoyed his job as a cameraman for KFOR, the Tacoma, Washington, TV station that proclaimed *We're here FOR you!* But shooting the six o'clock morning news on this first Monday in December promised to be more fun than usual. They were doing a public service announcement for The Haven, a no-kill animal shelter—and its extremely attractive director, Tansy Dexter. Plus she'd brought dogs.

With her mop of curly black hair, unrehearsed smile and laughing blue eyes, Tansy was a cameraman's dream. She easily outshone the stylized perfection of the KFOR news anchors. But even if she hadn't upstaged them, her canine buddies would have.

She'd walked into the studio carrying a too-cute beige-and-brown shih tzu with button eyes, a red bow on its collar and a face that would melt the hardest heart. Close behind, a little blue-haired lady in a red jogging suit held the leash of a cream-colored Irish wolfhound the size of a small pony. The wolfhound sported a larger red bow on its collar.

The dogs were a brilliant choice. By bringing two such different breeds, Tansy had demonstrated a keen understanding of visual drama.

Anchorwoman Lisa Dunbar moved out from behind the Channel 10 news desk and over to the studio set where they'd be shooting the segment. The set featured three dark green easy chairs, a five-foot artificial Christmas tree and a dark wood coffee table topped with a small red poinsettia. Lisa took the center chair.

While Tansy was being fitted with a mike, she talked soothingly to the small dog. After that she was directed to the chair on Lisa's right, and the grandmother type, who had no mike, was settled on the left. The regal wolfhound claimed a sizeable chunk of real estate on the floor. Head up, he kept a close watch on Tansy.

Station manager Paul Huntington had a soft spot for The Haven because his family had adopted their beloved golden retriever, Sadie, from there a year ago. He'd instructed Ben and the other two cameramen to get as many adorable doggie shots as possible to convince viewers to donate or adopt. Ben planned to follow Paul's directions, but Tansy was so expressive that she'd probably generate as much support as the dogs. In his opinion, faces like hers justified the invention of cameras.

Then again, maybe he was biased. He'd spent so many years training his lens on carefully made-up women like Lisa that Tansy was a refreshing change. Dressed in jeans, sneakers and a blue sweatshirt with the shelter's logo on the front, she seemed genuine and approachable.

Lisa, blonde and elegant in a gray silk suit and a Christmas-red blouse, was the more classically beautiful of the two. But she was also addicted to the spotlight. He wondered if she'd ever competed with animals for center stage. In his experience, the animals won every time.

When everyone was seated, Lisa responded to a cue from the station's director and looked into the camera with practiced ease as she introduced Tansy. "She's brought some friends along," Lisa added. "One of her many dedicated volunteers, Rose Parker, and a dynamic doggie duo." She turned to Tansy. "I hope both these doggies are available for adoption, because I just got a signal from our director that the phones are lighting up."

"They're available, Lisa." Tansy's smile was effortless. "This little guy is Ewok. He's four years

old and mostly shih tzu, but we think he might have some cocker spaniel in him, too.”

Lisa beamed at the small dog. “What a perfect name. He looks just like those creatures in *Star Wars*. How’re you doing, Ewok?”

The little dog stood on Tansy’s lap and wriggled happily as he focused his dark button eyes on Lisa. “Oh, he wants to come to me!”

Tansy laughed. “He might, at that. He loves people. But I’d better keep him over here. Your suit looks expensive.”

“I’m sure it could survive a few paw prints.”

“Let’s wait until he’s adjusted to his surroundings.”

Lisa managed a tight smile. “That’s fine. He’s so adorable I’m sure he’ll have a home before we wrap up this segment. I’m tempted, myself.”

“Ewok could have been adopted a dozen times since he came in, but we’re determined he won’t leave the shelter without his pal over there, Wookiee.”

Lisa glanced at the wolfhound. “Ah, I get it. Ewok and Wookiee. George Lucas would be thrilled. What’s their story?”

“They grew up together and now they’re inseparable,” Tansy said. “To place them in different homes would really stress them out.”

Now Ben understood why the dogs had been brought in together and why Wookiee’s attention was firmly on Tansy. She was holding his best pal.

Their story was touching, even to Ben, but he’d decided long ago that adopting a dog or cat was asking for heartache.

“Goodness, that’s a challenge,” Lisa said. “My little condo wouldn’t hold Wookiee, I’m afraid.”

“He doesn’t need as much indoor space as you think.”

Lisa chuckled. “No more than a MINI Cooper, at any rate.” She turned back to Tansy and Ewok. “I’ll put a bug in Santa’s ear to give Ewok and Wookiee a new home for Christmas.”

“Great. And while you’re at it, please tell Santa we have plenty of other loving dogs and cats looking for homes.”

“Absolutely! We’ll be featuring pictures of your cuties right up through Christmas Eve to promote The Haven’s Home for the Holidays campaign. Can you fill us in on the details?”

“You bet.” Tansy quickly outlined her plan to place as many animals as possible in homes just for the holidays so they wouldn’t have to spend the festive season at the shelter. “It’s like giving them a Christmas break,” she said.

“What a wonderful idea,” Lisa said. “I’m sure the residents of Tacoma will respond, especially because it also gives them a chance to try out a pet before making that forever commitment.”

“Exactly. But if people can’t take an animal over the holidays, I hope they’ll consider donating to our Christmas fund-raising campaign.”

“Your press release said you’re raising money for a special project?” Lisa said.

“We are! We recently removed sixty cats from a hoarding situation. We couldn’t accommodate them in our Kitty Condo, which is our free-roaming cat facility, so they’re temporarily being housed in a portable building on loan from a generous donor. So we desperately need to build a second Kitty Condo for our new furry friends.” As Tansy became more animated in describing the proposed facility, Ewok put his paws on her chest and began licking her face.

Laughing, she tried to coax him back down onto her lap as she continued. “We’re hoping that by Christmas Eve... Ewok, now stop!”

But the little dog was determined to give her kisses, and it was great television. Directions came

through Ben's earphones to keep his camera on Tansy. He was only too happy to oblige.

~~"We hope we'll have the money we need to... Ewok, honestly!"~~ Tansy dissolved into laughter again.

Watching her through the lens of his camera, Ben was fascinated. He'd been intrigued when she'd entered the studio, but her amused struggle with the affectionate little dog captivated him so completely that he forgot the time, forgot the studio, forgot everything but the joyful woman captured in his camera lens.

She was love personified, and a longing to have even a tiny bit directed at him stole the air from his lungs. But he'd learned the hard way to beware that telltale ache. Love was great when you had it, but when it disappeared, the pain brought you to your knees. He'd paid a high price to learn that lesson and wasn't about to forget it.

"Let me have him so you can talk." Leaving her chair, Lisa swooped in and gathered Ewok in her arms.

More instructions came through Ben's earphones. "Follow the dog."

He panned from a rather startled Tansy to a smug Lisa. An outsider might view Lisa's move as an attempt to be helpful. But after observing her since she was hired eighteen months ago, Ben recognized her bid to retake center stage. By holding Ewok, she had it.

"Such a cute little doggie!" She hugged and nuzzled him as if hoping he'd start to lick her, too. Instead Ewok squirmed, obviously wanting to escape. "Go on, Tansy," Lisa said. "I have this sweetie under control."

Ben didn't think so. He widened the shot to include Tansy as Lisa continued to maul the dog.

Tansy gave Ewok a worried glance before clearing her throat. "The bottom line is that we're asking the residents of Tacoma to open their hearts, their homes and their wallets so the animals can have a special holiday and an even better New Year. And we appreciate KFOR's support. The station's always been good to The Haven, but helping promote our holiday campaign goes above and beyond."

"And we're happy to do it." Lisa hugged the shih tzu tight. "After all, we're here FOR..." She paused and her eyes grew wide. With a shriek, she tossed Ewok from her lap onto the coffee table.

"Cut! Cue the commercial!" The command came through Ben's earphones a second after he'd already stopped filming.

Tansy made a grab for Ewok, but the spooked dog dashed across the large coffee table, knocking over the poinsettia and spilling dirt everywhere. Jumping out of her chair, Lisa gestured to the dark stain on her silk skirt. "The little bastard peed on me!"

God, it was hard not to laugh, but Ben loved his job, so he controlled the impulse. Still, Lisa had deserved it. Tansy had tried to save her, but she hadn't listened.

"Ewok!" Tansy dashed after the tiny dog, darting through a maze of camera trolleys and cables.

Ben took off his headset so he could help. By pure coincidence the little bundle of fur ran past him. He made a grab and connected with a warm body. Holding Ewok against his chest, he tried to calm the frightened dog.

"Thank you." Tansy stood in front of him, her blue eyes no longer laughing. "Sometimes he gets over-excited and lets loose. I think that's the cocker spaniel in him. Wookie's usually a steadying influence, but with all the people, and the lights, and the noise..."

And the idiot woman squeezing the breath out of him. But Ben was too much of a professional to say that about a colleague. "Bringing them in together was a brilliant idea, though." He handed Ewok to her. "I hope you find a home for them."

"So do I." She stroked the quivering dog with a gentle touch. He whined and reached up to lick her face again. "It's okay, Ewok. You're fine now. We'll go get Wookie and you'll feel better."

“Adopting them out as a pair is the right thing to do,” Ben said. “Stick to your guns on that.”

“Don’t worry. I intend to.” She glanced up and her gaze held his. “You’re an animal lover, I can tell.” She didn’t voice her next thought, but it was there in her eyes. Would *he* take the dogs?

He pretended he hadn’t understood her silent question. He did love animals...from a distance. So many people took on pets with a breezy nonchalance, as if loving creatures with a short lifespan was an easy choice that had no consequences. He knew from experience that wasn’t true. He wasn’t about to explain all that to her, though, so he said nothing.

She blinked as if confused by his silence. “In any event, thanks for capturing Ewok. It’s not good for him to race around in a panic.”

“It’s not good for any of us to race around in a panic.” He smiled because looking at her made him want to do that. He swore she had flecks of sunshine in those blue eyes of hers. In Tacoma, where it rained a lot, sunshine in any form was a valuable commodity.

“Guess not.” She continued to gaze at him intently. “Have we met before? You look so familiar.”

“We haven’t met. I would have remembered.”

“On the air in five!” called the director.

Ben replaced his headset. “Sorry. Gotta go. Weather’s next.”

“Right. Thanks again.” She hurried away, taking the sunshine with her.

Ben concentrated on filming the weather report and did his best to forget about Tansy Dexter. He preferred his relationships light and breezy—easy come, easy go. And his instincts told him Tansy would expect much more than that.

Judging from the passionate way she spoke up for the animals, her emotions ran deep, deeper than he cared to go. He was glad that people like Tansy existed in the world, but he couldn’t follow her chosen path, and she would never understand his decision not to adopt.

She was the kind of woman who would get past his defenses, demand that he drop his guard and become vulnerable again.

There was no way he would risk that.

* * *

TANSY’S SUBURBAN HAD been retrofitted for hauling animals. After she and Rose loaded Wookie and Ewok into the back, they hurried around to the front of the vehicle and climbed in, their breath fogging the air. Tansy dug out the keys and coaxed the balky engine to life before switching the heater to high. The cold rain tapping on the windshield could easily turn to snow by nightfall.

Rose rubbed her hands together and held them against her wind-reddened cheeks. “That was interesting.”

“It wasn’t Ewok’s fault.” Tansy’s anger resurfaced as she left the station’s parking lot. “I had to be nice, especially since Paul’s running promos from now until Christmas, but I could have throttled that woman.”

“She almost throttled Ewok,” Rose said. “Good thing she didn’t pursue the idea of adopting these two.”

“Yeah, that would have been awkward. You and I know she’d only have been doing it as a publicity stunt, but Paul might not have seen it that way. He’s a nice guy, and I’d rather not lose his goodwill by refusing to give his publicity-crazed anchorwoman Ewok and Wookie.”

“Speaking of nice guys, that cameraman was helpful.”

“He was.” Tansy’s pulse beat a little faster thinking about his sexy brown eyes.

“And gorgeous.”

Tansy glanced over at Rose and grinned. “You noticed that, did you?”

“I may be old enough to be his grandmother, but that doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate tall, dark and handsome when I see it. If I’m not mistaken, you two shared a moment.”

Tansy’s cheeks warmed. She hoped she hadn’t looked quite as dazzled as she’d felt. “I was trying to mentally place him.”

“Don’t blame you. Was he on a beach towel in the sand or on a bearskin rug in front of the fire?”

“Rose!” Tansy laughed, bringing an excited bark from Ewok. “I was trying to figure out why he looks so familiar. I swear we’ve met before.”

“Did you tell him so?”

“I did, but apparently we haven’t met. He said he would have remembered.” Sexual heat curled through her as she thought about the low, intimate way he’d said it.

“Whew!” Rose fanned herself. “A guy who knows how to deliver his lines. And he wasn’t wearing a ring. I checked. What’s his name?”

“Don’t know.”

“Why on earth not?”

“Didn’t think to ask.”

Rose slapped her forehead. “You meet a hero type who rescues precious little Ewok, a man who says he would have remembered if you’d met before, and you neglect to get his name?”

“I’m out of practice with that kind of thing.” Though now Tansy wished she had a name to attach to the first man in ages to arouse her dormant libido.

“I know you’re out of practice. I’ve volunteered at the shelter for almost two years, and I don’t think you’ve had so much as a date, let alone a romance. I figured you were either too busy or very picky.”

“I’m both.”

Rose nodded. “I realize your work brings you joy, and there’s nothing wrong with being picky. But FYI, you and that cameraman were giving off sparks.” She pulled a phone out of her small messenger bag. “I’m going to call the station and find out his name.”

“No!” Then her panic turned to laughter. “Okay, you got me. Very cute, Rose. You don’t have the number.”

“Yes, I do.” She hit a button on her phone. “Yesterday you asked me to double-check when we were supposed to arrive. The number’s still in my phone.”

Tansy groaned. She’d forgotten about that. “Rose, hang up. Seriously.”

“No worries. I’ll just say that The Haven wants to send him a personal note for his part in recapturing Ewok.”

“That’s a flimsy excuse. Please don’t—” But Tansy was wasting her breath. Rose was already talking to someone at KFOR.

“Yes, I mean that quick-thinking cameraman who saved little Ewok after he escaped. We want to send him a note of thanks. Ben Rhodes? Got it.”

Nice name, but Tansy couldn’t connect it to the dim memory she had of seeing him somewhere before.

Theoretically, Rose should be hanging up now that she’d found out his name, but for some reason she was still talking. “Really? That’s too bad.” She paused. “Well, if you’re considering sending someone out, I can’t think of a better choice than Ben Rhodes, if he’s available.”

Tansy’s eyes widened as she glanced over at Rose, eyebrows raised.

Rose pretended not to notice. “Well, good. I hope it works out. I’ll check with Tansy. ’Bye.”

~~“You’ll check *what* with Tansy? What are you up to, Rose Parker?”~~

The volunteer’s expression was smug as she tucked the phone back into her purse. “You remember those candid photos of the animals you gave them so they’d have something for the promo spots?”

“Yes. I know they aren’t great, but it was all I had.”

“They didn’t pass muster, so they want to send one of their cameramen out to take some better shots.”

“And you suggested Ben.” She tried to sound disapproving, but that was difficult when she was short of breath and squiggles of excitement were dancing through her system.

“Yes.” Rose settled back in her seat with a smile. “He’ll be perfect.”

CHAPTER TWO

PERFECT. THE WORD CERTAINLY described Ben as Tansy opened the front door of the yellow-and-white Victorian that The Haven used as its administration building. She and Ben had agreed on an early Saturday morning appointment, and she'd turned on the white Christmas lights outlining the house to banish the gloom.

Against the backdrop of those sparkling lights, he looked ruggedly handsome in jeans, boots, a sheepskin jacket and a brown cowboy hat. The scent of the fresh pine wreath hanging on the door came in with him, along with the tang of frost and his minty aftershave.

Tansy greeted him as nonchalantly as she could, considering they were alone for the first time and her heart tap danced with excitement. She'd suggested giving him a tour before The Haven opened for the day, which meant that even Faye, the receptionist, wasn't around.

"Good morning." Tansy extended her hand and Ben pulled off a leather glove to shake it. "Where's your equipment?"

"Left it in the Channel 10 van." His grip was warm and firm, but the brim of his hat cast his face into shadow, making his expression difficult to read. "I wanted to get the lay of the land first."

"Of course. No sense in lugging everything around until you're ready to start." When he let go of her hand, she resisted the impulse to press it against the butterflies circling in her tummy.

Stepping around him, she relocked the door. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this. I knew my pictures weren't very good. Photography isn't my strong suit."

"Maybe photography isn't, but I can already tell this is." He walked into the reception area. What had once been the house's living room was now divided by a waist-high counter. Two desks and several filing cabinets occupied the larger space behind the counter. In front of it, two sturdy wooden armchairs and a low table created a seating area, and a coat tree stood in the corner.

Ben's gaze lingered on a small artificial tree sitting on the counter. Its only decorations were a strand of multicolored lights and white angel donation cards hanging from the branches. A small sign invited visitors to choose a card and donate the item listed on it.

Unhooking one of the angel-shaped cards, he tucked it in the pocket of his coat. "That angel tree's a good idea. Paul said you've made astounding progress at The Haven since you were hired three years ago."

"He's giving me too much credit. None of this would have been possible without a generous benefactor who donated this land, including both houses, when he died."

"According to Paul, that benefactor was inspired by your enthusiasm for the animals. So you'll have to take some of the credit, Tansy."

Hearing her name spoken in his deep baritone sent a shiver of delight up her spine. "What can I say? I love my work."

"Obviously." He walked over to a bulletin board mounted on the wall to the right of the seating area. Tilting his hat back with his thumb, he scanned the array of snapshots.

"More bad pictures, I'm afraid," she said.

"Not so bad. The idea of putting up pictures of folks with their newly adopted animals is terrific. You just need a better camera."

“No, I need a better photographer.”

Ben scanned the pictures. “Don’t sell yourself short. I see potential there.” He turned back to her. “So The Haven ended up with these two houses, and you designated the bigger one as your headquarters.”

“That’s right. It’s mainly office space except for a couple of rooms we use as temporary holding areas for incoming animals. There’s not much to photograph in here.”

“Are you also housing animals in the blue Victorian next door?”

“No, that’s where I live, along with whatever animals I’m fostering at the moment. Right now it’s Ewok and Wookiee.”

His eyebrows rose. “No one’s taken them?”

“Not yet.” She did her best to breathe normally, but her chest was tight with the thrill of seeing him again. “I had hoped their TV appearance would help, and by the way, the camera work on that segment was wonderful. Paul said a good part of it was your doing.”

“Animals make great TV.”

“Only if the person behind the camera has a feel for them. You do.”

He met her gaze. “Thank you. That’s nice to hear, but it didn’t result in a home for Ewok and Wookiee. I’m sorry about that.”

She gulped and resisted the urge to fan herself. He was potent. “Many dog lovers prefer a certain size. They want small, big or in between. The big and small combo takes some getting used to. But I’m not splitting them up. Someone will come along.” Once again she wondered if maybe Ben would adopt them.

She’d developed a reputation for being able to match animals with their ideal human companions, and her instincts told her Ben would be perfect for those two dogs. He appeared to have the calmness Ewok needed and the athleticism to play with Wookiee.

But there was something else, something more subtle that she’d picked up from watching the television clip. He obviously saw the dogs as creatures worthy of notice and respect. Not everyone did, and it was a trait she admired.

She really hoped he’d take Ewok and Wookiee, but for some reason he wasn’t rising to the bait. Maybe he needed help to figure out that these dogs were meant for him. “Do you have any animals at home?”

“Nope.”

She was taken aback by his definitive tone. “Not interested?” Her spirits spiraled downward.

He shook his head.

She waited for an explanation. When none came, her disappointment bloomed out of all proportion to the situation. She wanted to blame Rose, who had woven fantasies all week long about how Ben could be her Prince Charming.

But she was a grown woman of twenty-eight who shouldn’t allow anyone to plant ideas in her head. And they’d both been wrong about Ben. He could be the most desirable man in the world, but if he didn’t want to share his life with companion animals, he was not the guy for her.

Animals were her life, had been ever since she was a little girl. Although it might sound corny, she felt that she had a calling to love and protect them. The concept of euthanizing those deemed unadoptable was blasphemy to her, which dictated that she had to work for a no-kill shelter.

Rose’s instincts and that wonderful film clip to the contrary, Ben wasn’t willing to offer his home to an animal, and he wouldn’t reveal why. She couldn’t imagine having a close friendship, let alone a romantic relationship, with someone who had that attitude.

She had to write him off as her prince and quit daydreaming. He was here to do a job, and once he had, she'd put him totally out of her mind.

"All the photo ops will be in the buildings out back," she said. "Let me get my coat, and I'll show you the—whoops, hello, Max." She turned to greet the orange tabby that appeared unexpectedly, hopping up from behind the counter. "I'm surprised you made an appearance, kitty-cat."

Max sat on the tan Formica, tail curled around his haunches as he fastened his green-eyed gaze on Ben.

"Max is our office cat," Tansy explained. "Most people think that's funny because office cats are supposed to be friendly and Max certainly isn't. He takes aloofness to a whole new level. If I were to try and pet him now, he'd probably walk away. He's never checked out a visitor, either."

A soft rumble came from Max's chest.

Tansy stared at the cat, who continued to focus on Ben. "Now you're *purring*? What's up with that?" She looked over at Ben. "Max hardly ever purrs."

"Maybe I remind him of somebody he used to know."

"I suppose that's possible. He was a stray, so we don't know his story. Since he's both standoffish and neurotic, it's unlikely he'll be adopted, so we've designated him as our unfriendly office cat."

"What's neurotic about him?"

"When he's stressed, he'll chase his tail and chew on it. Sometimes we have to bandage it and make him wear the cone of shame so he won't chew the bandage." Tansy shook her head and sighed. "But I love him, anyway."

"That's why you're good at your job. You probably have something you love about every dog and cat in the place."

"I do. They're each special in their own way, even curmudgeons like Max." She consulted the clock hanging on the wall. "But enough about that. We'd better get moving if we're going to have any time at all for you to take pictures this morning."

"And I want to make sure I get them before the morning naps start."

"Good thought. Let me get my coat and we'll be off."

So he knows animals tend to grab a midmorning nap. She thought about that as she walked around to her desk and picked up the dark blue parka she'd draped over the back of her chair. He might not want animals in his house, but he was familiar with their habits.

She shoved her arms into the sleeves of her coat and glanced down as she fumbled with the zipper. When she had it engaged, she raised her head, intending to tell Ben to follow her down the back hallway to the rear door.

Her breath caught. He stood at the counter scratching behind Max's ears. Nobody scratched behind Max's ears. He never allowed it.

But the cat was relishing the attention now, and Ben was a natural at giving that attention. Tansy could tell when someone wasn't used to interacting with animals—their movements were hesitant and awkward. Ben might not have any animals now, but he'd been close to at least one cat in the past, a cat he'd loved. Maybe she shouldn't put much stock in that, but...she did.

Turning away so Ben wouldn't catch her staring, she zipped her parka in one noisy motion. By the time she finished, he'd moved away from the counter and Max, who still seemed mesmerized by the man in the sheepskin coat and cowboy hat. Now she was really curious about what had happened to Ben that kept him from wanting pets. If she kept her eyes, ears and even her heart open, she might be able to find out.

Taking a deep breath, she met his gaze. "Ready to explore The Haven?"

“Lead the way.”

“We’ll visit the cats first.” She’d thought maybe Ewok and Wookie would touch him the most, but perhaps not. If he could warm up to Max, then he’d be a sucker for the sweethearts he was about to meet.

* * *

IN THE GRAY LIGHT OF DAWN, Ben followed Tansy out the back door of the house to the lighted buildings behind it. He hoped she hadn’t noticed him petting Max, because she might read too much into it. He should have resisted the impulse.

But Tansy’s comment that Max wouldn’t let anyone pet him had been a challenge. He’d wanted to test that, especially because Max had looked at him exactly the way his childhood cat, Mickey, used to, with a silent plea for attention.

Mickey had only been able to make that plea with one eye instead of two because he’d lost the right one in a fight. Ben later learned that male cats should be neutered so they wouldn’t fight or breed. But as a kid he hadn’t known that, and his aunt and uncle certainly wouldn’t have wanted the expense of a vet bill.

So he’d allowed Mickey to roam the streets of whatever town they moved to in their vagabond life. Max looked so much like Mickey that if Ben believed in kitty reincarnation, he’d wonder if Mickey had somehow come back in the body of this cat. With his eye repaired.

Didn’t really matter if he had, though. Mickey’s life had been cut short by a car. He’d been ten—no, so bad, actually, for a cat, especially an outdoor one. Ben had heard of indoor cats like Max making it past twenty, or even twenty-five, but that still wasn’t long enough to suit Ben. He wasn’t into long-lived animals like parrots or tortoises, so he was better off staying out of the game.

Scratching behind Max’s ears had felt achingly familiar, though. This gig was already testing his resolve not to form attachments. But petting one orange tabby wasn’t the same as forming an attachment, he told himself. It changed nothing.

A light snow the night before had turned to slush, but someone had shoveled the lighted walkway that led from the back of the house to a couple of octagonal buildings. A signpost pointed left to the larger one, christened the Doggie Digs, and to the right for the smaller octagon named the Kitty Condo. Beyond that stood a boxy portable building that must be where the cats from the hoarder were being kept.

The signs designating the cat and dog areas were cute but unnecessary. A chorus of barks from the larger octagon would have clued him in.

“It’s feeding time.” Tansy paused and glanced toward the Doggie Digs. “One of the high points of their day, obviously.”

“I’m partial to a good meal, myself.”

She graced him with one of her million-dollar smiles. “Me, too.”

And here he was, once again gazing at her expressive face and wishing...what? That he could figure out some stupid reason to spend more time with her? So he could become dependent on that smile for his happiness? No way.

“I should buy you lunch sometime, to thank you for doing this,” she said.

“That’s a generous offer.” Was she asking him out? If she was as interested in him as he was in her, it would be hard to keep her at arm’s length. “But I hope you don’t think I volunteered my time for this. The station’s paying me.”

“Well, sure, I thought they probably were, since they insisted on sending someone out to get better shots. But even so, you’re giving up your Saturday morning.”

“I don’t mind.” And that was the crux of his dilemma. He’d looked forward to coming out here. Professional pride had something to do with it, because he liked the idea of improving on the photos she’d provided. But he’d also just wanted to see her.

Maybe he’d hoped that she wouldn’t be as appealing today as she had been on Monday. Wrong. She fascinated him more than ever. He couldn’t figure out how she maintained her bright optimism given the realities of her job. How could she love these animals with all she had when she knew that loving them would also bring pain?

“Sorry.” She gave him an apologetic glance. “I’m wasting time gabbing about lunch instead of giving you the tour I promised. Do you have any questions so far?”

He had a million of them, all about her and how she had come to be the person she was. But that would invite questions about himself, and she would want him to reveal things he’d kept hidden for years. “No questions,” he said. Then he decided that sounded abrupt. “I take that back. What about the shape of these buildings? I’ve never seen an octagon used for an animal shelter before.”

She brightened. “Aren’t they amazing? We built the Doggie Digs first. We borrowed the octagon concept from a no-kill shelter in Utah called Best Friends Animal Society. I spent a week there and was so inspired. The design allows us to have a central area for organizing food and meds. The pie-shaped enclosures branch out from the center.”

Ben nodded. “Looks efficient.”

“It is. Once we saw how well it worked, we used the same design, slightly modified, for our Kitty Condo.” She walked toward the door leading into the cat building. A sign warned Caution, Loose Cats. She opened it a crack and warm air spilled out. “All clear?”

“All clear,” called a female voice from the other side of the door. “I’m cuddling Brutus, and he’s the only one out here right now.”

Tansy opened the door wider and stepped inside. “Good. I’ve brought the cameraman from KFOR.”

Ben followed her through the door and closed it again. The octagonal room was about the size of an average kitchen and resembled one, too, with its countertops, cabinets, refrigerator, washer and dryer. There was no stove, but he noticed a microwave and a toaster oven. Both the washer and dryer were running.

“Ben Rhodes, meet Cindy Stanton, one of our valuable weekend volunteers. Cindy’s a senior in high school, so her weekdays are full, but she comes over every Saturday and Sunday morning to help feed the cats and scoop the litter boxes, even when it’s cold and dark outside.”

“I want to be here, no matter what the weather is.” Cindy, a lanky teenager with a blond ponytail, was wearing a practical outfit of jeans and a long-sleeved rock band T-shirt. She sat on the floor cradling a small black cat with white tuxedo markings. She glanced up at Ben with interest. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Rhodes. Is it okay if I don’t move? Brutus finally settled down, and I—”

“Please don’t get up.” Ben crouched down, reached over and gently stroked a finger down Brutus’s soft fur. “He’s young.”

“He’s young and he’s a maniac. I’m working to socialize him so he won’t bite and scratch people.”

Ben looked closer and noticed small red welts on the backs of Cindy’s hands. “That’s dedication.”

“That’s love. I adore this little guy. My whole family’s allergic except me, or I’d take him home in a second.” She grinned. “Actually, I’d take a *bunch* of them home. When I get my own place, I’m so going to have lots of cats, and maybe foster, too.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Tansy said, a smile in her voice.

“No worries. I can hardly wait.” She glanced at Ben, who was still stroking the cat. “I’m so glad KFOR is helping us with this campaign and that they sent you to take some pictures. Nothing against you, Miss Dexter, but you really need better ones for the promo spots. What they used this week? Kinda lame.”

Tansy laughed as if she wasn’t the least bit insulted. “I know.”

Cindy returned her attention to Ben. “So where’s your camera?”

“I left it in the van. I wanted to get my bearings before I started shooting.”

She nodded. “Makes sense, but you might as well go back and get it before you head into one of the cat rooms.”

“Oh?” Ben continued to run a finger along Brutus’s silky fur. He’d forgotten the pleasure of such a simple caress. “Why is that?”

“Have you ever been in a roomful of cats, cats with toys and branches to climb on, not to mention tunnels, and shelves and all that stuff?”

“Can’t say that I have.” He was intrigued by the concept. “Don’t they fight?”

Cindy gave a shrug. “Not so much.”

“But they do fight sometimes,” Tansy said. “We watch for that and only allow the aggressive ones in for short visits until they settle down.”

“Even if they fight a little,” Cindy said, “it’s still so much better than cages.”

Ben levered himself to his feet. “Then I’d better go get my camera.”

“Good.” Cindy seemed pleased with that decision. “If you don’t, you’re gonna kick yourself, because you’ll get in there, and one of the cats, like Moppet or Nifty, will be doing something adorable, because they are *constantly* doing funny stuff, and you’ll miss it.”

Tansy unzipped her parka as if she meant to stay here while he retrieved his equipment. “I didn’t think to ask,” she said. “Are you going to take video or stills?”

“Both, but if I get something with the video camera, I’ll use a single frame, not a sequence. We’re only putting one shot up on the screen at a time.”

“Which is why they have to be really *fantastic* shots,” Cindy said.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” Tansy shoved her hands into the pockets of her jacket and smiled at him. “We need someone with a magic touch.”

Ben’s heart lurched. Unless his instincts were wrong, she was flirting with him. The invitation in her eyes was subtle, but his response wasn’t. He wanted to accept the invitation. Good thing Cindy was there, because he had no business accepting anything from Tansy.

But that didn’t stop his traitorous mind from imagining what it would be like to step closer and cradle her face in both hands. And then he’d kiss her, very gently, taking it slow at first. After that—

“Ben, do you want me to go with you? I think you can find your way easy enough. There’s a sidewalk that leads around the house to the parking lot.”

He snapped out of his dangerous daydream. “Not if you have something to do here.”

“There’s always something to do here. There are path lights, but if you want me to show you I’ll be happy to go along.”

“I’m sure I can find my way. It’s getting lighter every minute. I’ll get my equipment and be right back.” He slipped out the door, cursing himself for being a fool. Kissing Tansy would be a huge mistake, both personally and professionally.

He was a cameraman on a job, and that did not include getting cozy with the subject. He could get fired for that, and rightly so. But even without considering his job security, he couldn’t afford to get carried away.

Kissing her would open him up to God-knows-what. Yes, he was drawn to her and wanted to find out what made her tick. But then she would demand to know what made *him* tick, and he wasn't about to let her or anyone get that close. If she tempted him, he'd just have to get over it.

CHAPTER THREE

“I LIKE BEN. HE’S CUTE.” Cindy held Brutus in the crook of her arm as she carefully got to her feet. The little cat worked his way up to nestle against her shoulder but didn’t try to squirm away.

“I suppose.” Tansy congratulated herself on that neutral response when two minutes ago she’d been on the verge of flinging herself into Ben’s arms. Cindy had been an excellent chaperone, for which Tansy was grateful. Mostly.

She took off her parka and hung it on a hook beside the door before walking over to check the towels in the dryer. Ben was not immune to the charms of animals. She’d known that from the way he’d cradled Ewok against his chest on Monday morning, and today he’d voluntarily made overtures to both Max and Brutus. Ben was a real puzzle, one she desperately wanted to solve.

“I think he likes you.”

Tansy ducked her head and began pulling towels out of the dryer because she didn’t want Cindy to see her blush. “He’s just a friendly person doing his job.”

“Maybe so, but when he looks at you, there’s more than friendship going on. You may have missed it because you haven’t been dating recently. I have, and I know that look.”

Tansy folded towels as if her life depended on it. “Have you been talking to Rose, by any chance?”

“As a matter of fact, she called me last night.”

Tansy stopped folding and turned to stare at the teenager. “About Ben?”

“Yep. We both agree you need a love life, and she wanted me to check this guy out and see what I thought of him. I think he’s pretty cool.”

Tansy shouldn’t be surprised that the two were in cahoots on this. Of all the shelter volunteers, she was closest to Rose and Cindy. “Are you supposed to report back to Rose?”

“Of course. She’d promised that gentleman friend of hers, Mr. Hobson, that she’d help with his Christmas shopping or she would have found an excuse to drop by this morning. She’s dying of curiosity.”

Tansy picked up the stack of warm towels and hugged them to her chest. “Then tell Rose that we have a potential glitch.”

“He’s in a relationship?”

“I’m not sure. If he is, that would be a deal killer. I don’t poach.”

“If he’s in a relationship, then he has no business looking at you the way he did. I say he’s not. So what’s the potential glitch?”

“When he first arrived this morning, he told me point-blank that he’s not interested in having animals in his life.”

Cindy’s mouth dropped open. “Really? After the way he was loving on Brutus?”

“I can’t explain that. Or the fact that I caught him scratching Max’s head.”

“You’re making that up. Max never lets us pet him.”

“I know, but he hopped up on the counter and started purring while Ben and I were in the office looking around. That was surprising enough, but then I went to get my coat, and when I turned back, there was Ben, scratching behind Max’s ears.”

“So why doesn’t he want animals? Maybe he lives with somebody who’s allergic. Not a girlfriend,

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