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*La Selva Beach, California*

Ashley Stevens stood on the front porch and shaded her eyes from the early morning sun. “Here, boy.” Her voice shook with unwanted emotion.

She’d grown attached to the young pup she’d found yesterday wandering up and down the street. Poor thing looked like a cast-off when she spotted him, but a good scrubbing in the metal tub brightened up his beautiful tan coat.

She zipped up her blue sweatshirt, grabbed her car keys off the hook, and slammed the front door on her way out in pursuit of the Labrador. All God’s creatures deserved a loving home, and this pooch was no exception.

Sliding behind the wheel of her beat-up station wagon, she put the key in the ignition and peeled out of the driveway down the eucalyptus-lined street toward the beach, her teeth biting the inside of her cheek. “Tanner, where’d you go?”

Once in the parking lot, she scanned the area. A few dogs and their owners were taking their early morning walks.

*Please be here*.

She rushed to the shore and kicked off her sandals. The air was cool, crisp, and smelled of salt, and the waves crashed against the shore. Moist sand oozed between her toes, and a seagull flew overhead. She jogged up the beach, jumping over kelp and keeping her eyes peeled for the stray.

Ashley loved all the animals at the no-kill animal shelter where she worked and would take home as many as possible. But her grandmother had insisted that no animals were allowed at the beach house and told her as much on the phone the night before.

“Not just one?” Ashley’s voice rose a notch.

“Have you heard the saying, ‘If you give her an inch, she’ll take a mile’?” Grandma reprimanded. “I know you too well, Ashley Marie Stevens. You love those animals and won’t be able to stop at one. Pretty soon, the whole house will be filled with living creatures. Besides stinking up the place, you don’t have money to feed them all.”

“Is it okay to keep an animal overnight if I have to?” Ashley squeezed her eyes shut. She’d been pushing it, but how else would her grandmother understand?

Grandma had sighed. “One night, that’s all. Remember my allergies—and the reason you need to live in the beach house in the first place.”

How could she forget?

The photos all over the dining room table were proof enough she couldn’t afford an apartment let alone to keep an animal. If it weren’t for Grandma’s generous offer of the beach house in exchange for organizing the trunk of photos into scrapbooks, Ashley would still be living in her childhood home.

Now a half hour into her search, she had to call it quits or be late to work. Her heart sank as she made her way back to the car. At least she was able to wash the dog and give him a good meal. Maybe someone would find him and bring him to the animal shelter where she worked.

Ashley stepped onto the cool asphalt, brushed the wet gritty sand from her feet, and slid into her flip-flops. Her cell phone buzzed in her sweatshirt pocket. She answered it on the second ring.

“Hey, babe.” Bryan’s voice was low and husky.

“I can tell you haven’t had your first cup of coffee.” A smile lit her voice as she pictured her handsome boyfriend with his dark hair askew.

“You’re the first person I’ve talked to this morning?” He laughed. “Making coffee right now. You want to come over and join me for a cup?”

“Tempting but I’ve downed two already.” She sat on the worn upholstery of the driver’s seat. “But I wouldn’t mind grabbing a kiss or two.” Did she dare tell him Tanner ran away? No. Then he’d know she’d named him, which according to Bryan wasn’t a good sign. “Wait. Doesn’t school start in forty-five minutes?”

“Yeah, and I still need to hop in the shower.” Disappointment laced his tone. “We’ll make up those kisses tonight. I made reservations at Shadowbrook. I’ll swing by and pick you up at a quarter to six.”

The classy restaurant overlooked the beautiful Soquel Creek in Capitola. Her heart raced at the possible reason he might be taking her there. “I’ll be ready.”

“I’d better get in the shower. See you tonight, Ash.”

“Can’t wait. Love you.” She clicked off her phone and started the engine.

As a schoolteacher, it wasn’t like Bryan was loaded and took her out to expensive restaurants every weekend. Quite the opposite. She counted on one hand the number of times they’d eaten at upscale establishments and those had been for birthdays or other milestones.

Today signified nothing except for the fact she hoped to find Tanner a good home. And now that wouldn’t happen—unless she called Bryan back and asked him to change their reservation to a later time.

The minute the thought crossed her mind, she wanted to take it back. Bryan already believed she paid more attention to rescuing animals than to him—a fact that was true on occasion and had been the topic of many strained conversations. He had even teased her for driving a 1988 station wagon, but she needed the space for transporting animals, a completely logical choice for someone who worked at an animal clinic.

Taking care of abandoned and neglected animals was her passion, her true calling, and filled a deep-seated sense of loss she couldn’t pin down.

“Ashley, get a grip.” Her words tumbled out as she drove back to the beach house. But why would Bryan offer to take her to such a fancy place? After three years of dating, was he finally ready to propose? A girl could hope.

No matter what, she’d show Bryan that he mattered more to her than a dog she’d met less than twenty-four hours ago—even if Tanner did pull at her heartstrings.