

They passed several offices before they reached an open door.

“Maisy. Stay.” That same deep voice from the intercom floated to the hallway.

“Oooh! A dog!” Eliza dashed into the room.

Her little sprite was fast and already halfway across the office before Landry realized what was happening. “Eliza, wait!” Fortunately, she stopped at Landry’s words.

“I know, Mommy. Never touch a dog without permission. I just want to see.”

Eliza turned her big brown eyes toward the man who had come around his desk and knelt beside a dog now quivering with excitement.

The man—Callum Shaw, she assumed—met her daughter’s eyes and said, “Your mom’s right. You can’t ever rush at a dog, even dogs as gentle as this big baby. But if it’s okay with your mom . . .”

His eyes, which were as blue as the Carolina sky, now met hers. There was humor and gentleness. And shadows. Something dark flitted across his gaze. But then he blinked and it was gone.

Landry nodded her permission, and he turned all his attention back to her daughter. “This is Maisy. She’s a golden retriever. She’s three years old. She loves long walks in the woods, sunbathing, peanut butter, and belly rubs.” He demonstrated the belly rub. Maisy melted under his touch, and Eliza crept closer. “You can pet her. Maisy doesn’t bite my friends.”

Eliza dropped to her knees beside Callum and held out her hand toward Maisy’s nose.

Maisy took a quick sniff and rewarded Eliza’s good behavior with a lick. Callum stayed where he was until it was clear to everyone that Eliza and Maisy were set, then he rose to his feet and extended a hand. “Ms. Hutton.”

“Landry. Please.”

“Landry. A pleasure.”

Landry kept the contact brief. “Sorry, my hands are rough.” She turned them palms up. “Hazards of the job.”

Why had she said that? What did it matter if her hands were a bit on the crispy side? She didn’t have to prove anything to this man. Embarrassment crept across her and burst through her pores, heating her neck and face, and now she had no idea what to do with her hands. Should she put them down? Tuck them behind her back?

Callum glanced at her hands and turned his own up. “Same here.” He heaved a dramatic sigh. “It’s to my eternal despair that I’ll never land that hand modeling contract I’ve always hoped for.”

His easy humor made it automatic to tease him back. “Well, there’s always ditch digging.”

“Good point. If this construction gig doesn’t work out, I’ll have something to fall back on.” Callum turned his attention to Eliza. “And I gather your name is Eliza?”

She giggled with the abandon unique to happy children. “That’s right, but sometimes Mommy calls me Liza or ZaZa, but never Lizzy because that’s too close to Landry, and it gets confusing.”

Landry tried to keep a straight face as Eliza parroted what she’d heard Landry say too many times to count.

“It’s a pleasure, Ms. Eliza.” Callum pressed a hand to his chest. “I’m Cal Shaw. I’ll answer to Callum, but not LumLum because”—he dropped his voice to a stage whisper—“that’s just not dignified.”

Eliza’s laughter filled the room. Bronwyn hadn’t been wrong about Cal Shaw. He was very good with children. Even now, he kept his attention on Eliza. “Are you good here with Maisy while your mom and I talk?”

“Yes, sir.”

Cal grabbed a legal pad and pen from his desk and took the chair opposite the one he directed Landry to sit in. From their seats, they could both see Eliza and Maisy.

She waited for him to start the conversation, but maybe she was supposed to go first?

“She’s a beau—”

“Land—”

They both stopped talking, and his smile seemed genuine as he nodded to her. "Please. Go ahead."

"I was going to say your dog is beautiful." She willed her body to stop flushing scarlet, but it refused to cooperate. She didn't have to see herself to know that her face, neck, chest, and even her feet were on fire. This was why she did best behind the walls of The Haven. She could interact with the patrons there with minimal difficulty. But put her out in public, and she became a tongue-tied, socially inept disaster.

Cal's grin held mischief, and he leaned toward her. "If all goes as planned, she'll be pregnant soon. I bet Eliza would love a puppy for Christmas." His voice was cajoling and teasing, but at least he had the good sense to keep it too low for Eliza to hear.

He winked in a way that was friendly and not flirtatious, and Landry understood why Bronwyn liked him so much. He leaned back and in a normal voice said, "I gathered from your conversation with Carla that you're going to build nearby."

"Yes. I have three acres on the edge of Pierce land." She watched him carefully as she spoke and was unsurprised when his grip tightened on the pen at her words.

"How long have you lived in Gossamer Falls?"

"Long enough to know the Pierce and Quinn families don't get along."