

Excerpt from *Doubting River...*

Charm escaped outside, glad that Lucas's little scene had distracted Ellie before their tiff had blown up into a real argument. Okay, yeah, he had forgotten the appointment, but he did it to help her kid. That had to be worth something, even if it did involve training the dog she had expressly told him not to train.

He traipsed around the house and found his mother next to the side porch spraying mud off the aforementioned retriever. She glanced at Charm through the top of her glasses and waved the hose his direction.

"You look like you need this more than him."

"I decided in the moment that retreat was a wiser tactic than a shower." He took the hose and River's leash and assumed the dog bathing duty.

His mother settled herself on the steps. "So I guess I don't need to ask how the training session went."

He grimaced and focused the spray on River's back paws. "Something's not right. Oscar said he wasn't like this before. He used to be retrieve-crazy, and now he doesn't want to pick up anything." Well, he corrected mentally. Pick up but not hold.

"Time for a trip to the vet?"

Charm winced. "Yeah, Ellie's working two jobs and can't pay the mortgage. I don't think vet care for a dog she wishes didn't exist is gonna be an option. At least not when we don't know for sure it's medical."

Dot fell silent for moment, then slapped her thigh. "Then I guess I'll pay for it."

He stared. "Why would you do that?"

"Because Lucas is my grandson. Besides, if there really is something wrong with that dog, it would be cruel not to fix it if we can."

Charm squinted, decades of suspicion overriding any gratitude he might have felt. "And if that fix costs thousands of dollars?"

"Don't create problems that don't exist." His mother pushed herself to her feet. "I'd better go make some lunch for Lucas and Eleanor."

"They're late for rehab. They're not gonna have time for lunch."

"We'll see," she said brightly. She winked and sauntered up the stairs and into the house.

"Being a grandmother has softened you!" he called after her. He shook his head. Bemused, he muttered, "Done lost your mind."

He was still shaking his head and mumbling under his breath five minutes later when Ellie came down the stairs with a towel. By this time he had finished with River and was spraying the worst of the mud off himself. He eyed the towel. "Good timing."

She settled on the steps where their mother had been minutes earlier. "It's actually for him," she said with a jerk of her chin toward River, but she handed it over anyway. The retriever had already shaken off most of the water and was now alternately rolling and rubbing his face and shoulders in the grass.

Charm plopped down beside her and dried his face and hands anyway. "I don't think he'll mind. I take it you're not going to PT?"

"Not only are we not going to PT, but I have volunteered to spend an hour playing with that dog." She sounded disgusted by the idea.

"Oooh, that bad?" Charm made a kiss noise to get River's attention and motioned him over.

"I think my son hates me."

"He doesn't hate you. His whole world has crashed in on him." Charm rubbed the retriever's head with the towel. "He's lost his dad, he's lost school and his friends, you're working two jobs, and he's stuck with this weird guy he's never met."

"That's the worst," Ellie said.

"Totally." The siblings grinned at each other. Charm continued drying River for a moment, then asked as casually as he could, "I'm curious. Why didn't you raise a stink about us going behind your back to train River?"

She made a noise in her throat and shot him a glare, but she couldn't keep the corners of her mouth from turning up. "I love my son, and I love you, and I didn't want to discourage you from doing something together. Even if it does have to be a project with this dog."

River decided he'd had enough drying and presented his butt for scratching.

Ellie absently scritched the itchy spot right above his tail. "So what do I do now?" she asked.

Charm noted that she knew exactly where that itchy spot was and how River liked it scratched. "What you've been doing. Put one foot in front of the other. Lucas will be okay. He needs time."

She nodded, and they fell silent, watching River butt dance in ecstasy. Time, Charm reflected. It was all about time. Lucas needed time to grieve. Ellie needed time with her son. He himself would kill for some time away from farm chores.

"I have an idea," he said. "Next week is Mardi Gras."

She arched an eyebrow. "You would know that."

He ignored the jibe. "Biloxi has a pretty good parade. Let's go. Next Tuesday. No work. We drive down in the morning, back that night."

"You want me to call off work to drive four hours — each way — for a parade."

"Nope. I want you to call off work to spend a day having fun with your family." He bumped her with his shoulder. "Whadda ya say?"

She looked at River. Entranced by the delightful butt scritchies, River had now dropped into what Charm referred to as "upside-down pretzel dog." Butt still in the air, his front half on the ground twisted onto his left shoulder, as if he were trying to roll over for belly rubs. He craned his neck as much as possible to grin up at them, and his tail wagged furiously.

Ellie rose to her feet and headed inside. "Your dog is weird."

Charm chuckled. "He's not my dog."

She didn't respond.

He jumped to his feet and followed her, River at his heels. "Ellie? He's not my dog..."