

## Chapter One

Riley Jennings shifted the large Tabby cat in her arms and tried to stay calm. “Dottie is wearing her rabies tag. The phone number to the vet’s office is on there.”

The receptionist at Retro Village raised an eyebrow. “I’ve already explained to you. We need the visiting animal’s shot records on file.”

“But I don’t have the records. She’s Mr. Farley’s cat and he can’t remember what he did with them. I’ll go to the vet’s office tomorrow and get them, but they’re closed today.” Mr. Farley had left her a voice mail this morning while she was at church. He’d been so forlorn and was missing his cat so much, she’d rushed home to pick up Dottie and take her to the senior living facility. “Please.”

The woman shook her head. “I didn’t make the rule, but I also won’t bend it.”

Dottie meowed loudly as if in protest and Riley scratched behind her left ear. “It’s okay, girl,” she murmured. “I know you’re not happy.” Dottie had

been Mr. Farley's most loyal companion since she was just a kitten. She was nearly sixteen now.

"So there's nothing that you can do?" Riley asked. "Can you at least call Mr. Farley and let him know we're here? He can come outside."

The receptionist frowned. "Hold on." She picked up the phone and punched a number.

Riley glanced around. Did the fact that she was contemplating putting Dottie in her oversize bag and sneaking her past the front desk make her a terrible person? Before she could decide, the receptionist cleared her throat.

"Mr. Farley is ill. He has a slight fever and the head nurse doesn't want him to go outside."

That made it even worse. That sweet elderly man was sick and without the comfort of his cat. Riley was normally slow to anger, but the situation got the better of her. "Fine. But you haven't heard the last of me today." Before the woman could respond, Riley cuddled Dottie to her chest and stormed to her truck.

The blue sky and cotton ball clouds did little to brighten her mood. Late June in Arcadia Valley was lovely, and Riley was normally one to stop and take note, but today she only felt sad for Mr. Farley. He deserved better, and since he didn't have any family around, it looked like it was up to her to make sure he was taken care of.

Thanks to all her work with the animal shelter, not to mention her own pet boarding business, she had the local veterinarian's number in her phone. His home number. "Dr. Wilson?" she asked when he picked up. "You don't happen to have anyone working up at the clinic right now do you? It's Riley Jennings."

Dr. Wilson chuckled on the other end. "Riley, of course I recognize you. Did someone drop a pregnant stray on your doorstep again?" Pregnant strays tied to the porch were a common occurrence at Riley's house. She had lost count of how many she'd taken in. Her track record for successfully finding foster or permanent homes for the abandoned animals of Arcadia Valley was pretty good, too.

She smiled in spite of herself. "Not this time, Doc. Actually, I just need the shot records for Mr. Wilbur Farley's cat, Dottie. She can't visit him without them."

"Ah, yes. Mr. Farley and Dottie have been inseparable for years. I'm sure this transition is hard for both of them. Donna is at the clinic now checking on some of our weekend boarders. If you'll go to the back door, it should be unlocked and she can get you a copy of Dottie's records. I'll call her and let her know you are on the way."

"You have no idea how much this means to me. I'll drop a big bag of treats off for your customers

to enjoy soon.” In addition to dog and cat boarding, Riley also sold homemade treats at the local farmers market.

“You know you don’t have to do that, but I also won’t turn you down. Everyone loves those treats.”

Riley hung up, grinning. *Take that, Miss Follow the Rules Receptionist.*

Twenty minutes later, she and Dottie were back at the desk, papers in hand. “Here you go. Everything should be in order.” Riley smiled and placed the shot record on the counter. “Now can we please go see Mr. Farley?” She couldn’t wait to reunite the old man with his beloved cat.

The receptionist typed something into her computer. “Oops.” She grimaced.

What now? “What’s wrong?”

The woman sighed. “I didn’t see this earlier, but unfortunately I’m not going to be able to let you go back to Mr. Farley’s room, even with the paperwork in order.”

Riley frowned. “I don’t get it. I just jumped through a pretty major hoop to get shot records for Dottie so you would have them on file. I had to call in a favor at the vet’s office to get that taken care of on a Sunday afternoon. What exactly is the problem now?” Her voice was sharper than normal, but she didn’t care.

“It seems that Mr. Farley has a new roommate. And he’s allergic to cats.”

“Why in the world would you have put someone with a cat allergy in Mr. Farley’s room?” Riley asked. “I know good and well that he indicated on his paperwork that he’d have Dottie visiting.” Mr. Farley was frail, but his mind was sharp. He’d brought Dottie to her several weeks ago and opened up about his worries. His main concern was that Dottie wouldn’t be treated well. Riley had assured him that if she couldn’t find the perfect home for the cat, she would keep her as her own. Either way, she’d promised Mr. Farley that Dottie would visit as much as possible.

The receptionist shrugged. “Sometimes we don’t have a choice when it comes to bed availability.”

Riley bit her lip and contemplated her options. “Look, ma’am. I understand that there are rules and that you are only doing your job, but I had multiple messages from Mr. Farley today specifically requesting that I bring Dottie to see him. I would be glad to go put Dottie in the car and go get Mr. Farley myself.”

The woman looked at her with disdain. “I’ve already told you. The head nurse—”

Riley cut her off by holding up a hand. “I know. But don’t you think that sometimes the love and

companionship of a pet can be good medicine for someone not feeling well?”

They regarded each other for a long moment and Riley was sure she'd won the battle.

“No.” The woman shook her head. “Come back tomorrow.”

“I want to speak to your supervisor.” If her sisters could see her now, they'd freak out. Assertiveness wasn't exactly one of Riley's primary traits. But her passion for animals took over sometimes.

The receptionist glared. “It won't do you any good.”

“I'd like to try anyway.”

The woman dramatically pushed away from her desk and stomped toward a closed door behind the reception area.

Riley glanced down the hallway and then back to the empty reception desk, considering her options.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you,” an amused male voice said from behind her. “I'm pretty sure she'll put the whole place on lockdown if she comes back and you aren't still standing here.”

Riley turned slowly toward the voice, her cheeks flaming, and found herself staring into the most gorgeous amber eyes she'd ever seen.



Blake Taylor hadn't come back to Arcadia Valley after all these years to get distracted by a beautiful woman. But after observing the exchange between the tall, cat-wielding brunette and the scowling receptionist, he couldn't help himself. "I'm just saying... I don't think she'd take too kindly to you breaking all the rules and taking that cat down the hallway." He grinned. "Not that I'm all that fond of rules, but in this case, it might be in your best interest. I'd hate to see you be the headline on tonight's local news."

The girl gave him a small grin. "I'm a by the book kind of person, but not when it means keeping a sick elderly man and his sixteen-year-old cat from seeing each other."

"That does sound like a worthy cause." He furrowed his brow. "I've gotten the feeling this place is pet friendly though, so what's the problem?"

She filled him in on things. "I hate to be pushy, but he's called me more than once today, so I know it would mean so much to him."

"Maybe he just forgot he already called," Blake said helpfully. "I mean, he could be a forgetful old man. In fact, maybe he won't even remember he called and asked about the cat in the first place."

The look on her face told him she hadn't considered his words helpful in the least. "I think he will keep calling until he gets to see Dottie." She frowned at him.

"Fair enough." He was eager to change the subject. "I'm Blake, by the way. Blake Taylor."

"Riley Jennings." She eyed him suspiciously. "Do you work here?"

He shook his head. "No. I just rolled into town actually. Visiting a relative." He didn't offer more information than necessary because honestly, he was having a hard time wrapping his head around being back in Arcadia Valley. He was sure he couldn't explain his return to a pretty stranger without coming across sounding like a total idiot.

Riley didn't press him. "I see." She stroked the cat.

"So are you, like, this guy's granddaughter or niece or something? It's pretty nice of you to fight so hard to reunite him with his cat."

That garnered a smile, albeit a small one. "No relation. I have a business boarding animals and I also volunteer for the local animal shelter. Mr. Farley has asked me to re-home Dottie, but he wants to see her as much as possible."

"Can't blame him for that. Pets are family as far as I'm concerned."

Riley's blue eyes twinkled. "Me, too."



Finally. He was getting somewhere. “Where is Mr. Farley’s room located?”

“First. Just down this hall here.” She pointed toward the hallway that ran past the receptionist desk. “He’s temporarily sharing a room with another patient who is here for rehab. That’s part of why I’m so unhappy. He’s supposed to have a private room and his cat should be able to visit without a problem.”

Blake scratched his three-day old stubble. As soon as he found a place to stay tonight, a shower was in order. And a shave. “Well I’m pretty sure we’re going to run into trouble when the receptionist gets back. How about I help you?” What was he doing? He’d only meant to stop by Retro Village to get the lay of the land. Not to stick around doing good deeds.

“Help me? Are you going to stand guard while I’m in the room?” she asked.

He chuckled. “Nothing like that. In fact, we won’t even have to break the rules. Bend them maybe, but not break.” He held out his hands. “Give Dottie to me.”

She took a step back and put a protective arm over the cat. “Why?”

Blake raised his eyebrows. “Do I really look like someone who is going to steal a very overweight elderly cat?”

Riley grinned. “Guess not.” She handed the cat over.

Dottie was even heavier than she looked. “You go to the room and get the old man to the window. I’ll do the rest.”



Riley cast a backward glance at Blake as he carried Dottie out the front door. What an unusual day this was turning out to be.

“Miss!” The receptionist yelled down the hall.

Riley whipped around and held her hands up. “I don’t have the cat. It’s just me and I’m only going to check on Mr. Farley.” Mostly.

The woman regarded her suspiciously for a moment. “Well, okay.” With one last wary glance in Riley’s direction, she sat back down at the desk.

Riley hurried down the hallway toward Mr. Farley’s room. She knocked softly on the door.

“Come in,” Mr. Farley called.

She pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Mr. Farley sat up in his bed. “I’m so glad to see you, Riley.” He looked eager. “Is Dottie here? Is she okay?”

Riley nodded. “She’s doing great.”

“Have you found her a home yet?” he asked. He furrowed his brow. “She’s really a great cat. Make

sure the new owner knows how much she enjoys just a little bit of whipped cream.” He grinned. “I like a little whipped cream in my coffee, always have. Dottie swiped some once and was hooked ever since.”

Riley smiled. “I’ll keep that in mind. For now, she is settling in at my place just fine.”

He reached out and took her hand as she reached his bedside. “I can’t tell you how much that eases my mind. Everyone in town knows how much you love animals. I know you will see to it that my Dottie is cared for properly. She’s the only family I have left,” he said sadly.

Riley patted his arm. “I will take good care of her.”

“Where is she?”

“We have a little problem here, Mr. Farley. It seems that your new roommate is allergic to cats,” she said as she gestured toward the man sitting in a recliner in the corner.

“Where are my manners?” Mr. Farley asked. “I should have introduced you to my roommate. This is Charles Thompson.”

Riley smiled at the gray-haired man. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Thompson. I hope I’m not bothering you by stopping in.”

Mr. Thompson nodded. “We don’t get to see girls as pretty as you too often.” He gave her a

wink. “It’s nice to have a visitor. And you can call me Charles.”

“He just moved in last week, so I guess you can say he’s the new kid on the block.” Mr. Farley gestured toward his roommate. “We’ve known one another for several years though, so at least they didn’t put me with a stranger.”

“That’s nice that the two of you know one another.”

“But I’m not staying too long,” Charles said. “I’m only here to recover from a fall.” He frowned. “Not that I don’t enjoy Wilbur’s company, but I’d just as soon be at home.”

Mr. Farley let out a harrumph. “Wouldn’t we all?” He picked up the framed photo of Dottie sitting on his nightstand. “I miss my Dottie and my favorite coffee mug. And my old easy chair.”

“Getting old is for the birds,” Charles agreed. “But I’ve convinced my son to let me try to make it at home for a while longer once my hip is fully healed and I’ve completed the torture — I mean rehab — they make me do.” His eyes twinkled. “I still have a few things I want to take care of before I spend the rest of my days beating Wilbur at checkers.”

Mr. Farley rolled his eyes. “You wish. And torture my foot. They only make him walk a few steps at a time. Why, when I was in the Army—”

Charles snorted. “Army? How about me and my years as a marine? I know a thing or two about physical fitness, too.”

Before the discussion went any farther, Riley stepped to the window. She raised the shade and waved to Blake. “There’s someone here to see you, Mr. Farley.”

“Out the window?” he asked.

“Can you see out there okay?”

Blake pressed his face to the window and his eyes grew wide as he looked around the room.

“What’s wrong?” she mouthed.

He shook his head and just as quickly as he’d been there, he was gone.

“Um, hang on.” Riley peered outside and watched as Blake waved a kid over from the parking lot. He handed Dottie to the boy and pointed to the window where Riley stood. What was going on?

The boy brought Dottie to the window and held her up to the window sill.

“My Dottie!” Mr. Farley exclaimed. “Help me get up, please.”

Riley opened the window. “Thanks,” she said to the puzzled pre-teen. “Just hang on a few minutes, please.”

“Sure.” The kid didn’t look put out by Blake’s cat handoff.

She helped Mr. Farley to his feet and put his walker within his reach. “Be careful.”

He shuffled over to the window. “I’m so happy to see you.” He reached through the open window and stroked Dottie’s fur.

Riley beamed. These reunions always made her so happy. She left him with Dottie and mouthed a silent ‘thank you’ to the boy.

“That’s a nice thing you did,” Charles said. “He’s been missing that cat a whole lot.” He sighed. “I hate that I’m the reason she can’t come in to visit. I’m fine with dogs. Even horses and farm animals don’t bother me. But cats have always made me sneeze.”

She smiled. “It’s not your fault.” She stepped over to his side of the room where a handful of family photos sat on his nightstand. “Is this your family?”

He nodded. “Sure is. My wife framed those years ago, and they always sat on our nightstand, even after she passed away. When I left the hospital to come here and stay for rehab, my daughter-in-law brought them and put them up. She said I needed a little touch of home.”

“I’m sure she’s right.” One of the photos caught her eye and she picked it up.

A handsome guy in a tux filled the frame, clearly a senior photo from several years back.

“That’s my grandson.”

Riley stared at the face. The familiar face. The face of the cute guy who'd just ditched Mr. Farley's cat in the parking lot.

Charles Thompson's grandson was none other than Blake Taylor.

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