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## Chapter 1

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Janelle pushed open the big metal door and walked out into the crisp early morning air. The sun would be up in about five minutes, which was just enough time for her to do her stretches before her daily five-mile run. She was going to miss living on campus when summer break started. Spring term for Northern Oregon University would be over in two weeks, and then she'd be moving back home until fall. That thought made her cringe, but she refused to dwell on it, and instead focused on what a beautiful morning it was going to be, full of hope and promise. The dumpster beside her dorm had a railing along the side that was just the right height for stretching her hamstrings. She put her right foot on the rail, and as she leaned into the stretch, she heard a teeny tiny mewl.

Startled, she put her foot down, and looked around her feet, but the dim light from the streetlamp out front of the dorms wasn't enough. She pulled her phone out of her jacket and turned on the flashlight function.

"Kitty?" she called out softly. She got on her hands and knees and shined the phone's light under the dumpster but saw no furry ball.

A dismaying thought crossed her mind. She stood and used one knuckle to lightly tap the metal dumpster. A second later, she heard another pitiful mewl. Righteous indignation coursed through her. Had someone thrown a kitten away? What kind of monster would do that? Who could be so cruel?

The dumpster itself was huge, and Janelle was just under five feet tall. She didn't have the height to flip either of the two big plastic lids all the way open. But if she stood on the rail, she could hold a lid open to see inside. Once she had it open, she shined the flashlight inside the dumpster and scanned the bags of trash.

"Kitty, kitty?" she called.

She could now hear the mewling better, and she knew for sure it was in there but couldn't see it. The dumpster was half full, so she didn't want to climb in and accidentally smash the kitten. The sudden thought that there could be more than one in there made her even more determined. Leaning forward, she tried to get a better look and carefully scanned each area, trying to spot something moving.

"Hey, kid," a male voice called out. "Get down off of there before you hurt yourself."

She turned her scowl toward the voice. Through the dim light, she could see a tall man walking toward her.

"Don't even think about running," he warned as he got closer. "I'll catch you and call your pare..." he stopped mid-sentence once he was close enough to actually make out her face. His eyes traveled down to the outline of her breasts under her running jacket, and then he winced. "Shit. I'm sorry. I thought you were...well, a lot younger." He put a hand on the back of his neck. "I'm not trying to be rude or anything, but man you're short."

Because she was standing on the rail, which was a good foot off the ground, she was almost eye to eye with the incredibly handsome man. He had aquamarine eyes, blond hair, and some

scruff on his face from not shaving for a couple of days. His athletic build and square jawline made the term 'All American' go through Janelle's head. Which was ridiculous, because she was also American. But when people saw her, she knew that they thought 'Japanese', even though she was half Caucasian and third-generation American. Or maybe that was being too kind. Maybe they just thought 'Asian'.

"It's okay," she said softly, trying not to scare the kitten. "Do you think you could help me for a minute?"

"Probably. What do you need?"

Another mewl came from the dumpster, and the man's eyes darted to it.

"I think someone threw a kitty away. I'm trying to find it, but I'm not tall enough to get the lid all the way open."

His eyebrows drew together and his lips turned down. "What the fuck is wrong with people?" He gestured for her to come toward him and said, "Get down, and I'll get the lid open so we can find it."

She closed the lid and jumped down. He took her place on the rail, raised the closest lid, and carefully flipped it all the way up to rest against the wall of the dorm.

"Give me your phone," he said, holding his hand out. Once he had it, he shined the light down into the trash. As he moved the light slowly across the trash, he said, "What are you doing out here in the middle of the night anyway?"

Surprised by his accusing tone, she said defensively, "It's not the middle of the night, it's almost five-thirty. I was about to go for my morning run."

He glanced back and looked her up and down. "Alone?"

"I go to the track," she told him, pointing in that direction. "By the time I'm done with my five miles, there will be at least four other people out there."

Turning back to the dumpster, he said, "You should go with a friend. Especially when it's still dark out."

"None of my friends can keep up with me," she responded with a little smirk.

He looked at her again. "That's not a great reason to put yourself in danger. Didn't you hear about that guy who tried to strangle a girl in the Curie building during winter term?"

"Sure, I heard that rumor." She tried not to sound skeptical. Usually, those types of stories were blown way out of proportion by the time they'd traveled around the campus once or twice.

"Not a rumor," he said. "She was in my physics lab."

"Really?" Janelle had a hard time believing that.

"Yeah. I don't know her personally, but I saw the bruises on her neck when she was in class the next week."

"Wow." She believed him, but she still didn't think some poor girl's misfortune automatically meant that she should change her running schedule.

He stepped off the rail and added, "I don't see any kitten. I'm going to try the other side."

Once the lid on the other side was up against the wall of the building, he shined the light down, and this time, Janelle heard a tiny hiss.

"Found her," the guy announced. "I'll have to climb in to get her. Can you get up here and shine the light for me?"

"Make sure there aren't any other kittens in there before you get in," Janelle warned, as she walked around to his side.

"Good point." He shined the flashlight all around the area, and after searching, he said, "I only see one, and she's not in great shape." He scooted to the end of the little rail he was standing on to make room for her to stand on it also and handed her the phone. Once they were side by side, he pointed to the spot where he'd seen the kitten, and Janelle shined the light on it.

She gasped when she saw the kitten, coated with so much gunk that she couldn't tell what color its fur was. The fur was matted and clumpy as if it had gotten wet, dirty, and then dried with bits of food and trash in it. Its little eyes reflected the light,

making it look like a tiny demon with its ears back and tiny teeth showing when it hissed again.

The young man easily climbed over the side and carefully stepped into the trash to retrieve the little thing.

"Careful," she warned, but he'd already scooped the kitten up.

"She's a mess," he said as the kitten hissed and wiggled to get away. "Too weak to put up much of a fight." He handed the kitten over to Janelle.

Janelle gently held the tiny thing close to her chest with one hand and felt it shivering violently as it hissed again. She got down off the rail, and then the young man climbed out as well.

"Thank you so much," she said. "I have to get her inside and get her warm," Janelle added, turning toward her dorm.

"And then what?" he asked. "You can't have pets in the dorms."

Janelle raised an eyebrow. "Well, I won't tell if you won't."

He shook his head. "That's a problem, because if you live here in Truman Hall..." He pointed to the building they were standing beside. "...then I'm your temporary Resident Advisor."

"What?" She frowned. "Where's Chris?"

"I just took him to the hospital across town." He looked back the way he'd come and sighed. "That's why I'm up so early. His mom was in a car accident."

"Oh no, poor Chris. Is his mom—"

"She's in critical condition."

She gasped and put a hand over her mouth. "That's awful."

He nodded. "It is."

Janelle felt the kitten shivering in her hands and looked at the dorms. "There are only two weeks left in the semester. Can't you just look the other way while I take care of her?"

Scowling, he shook his head. "Absolutely not. Even if I was willing to look the other way, that kitten needs a vet. She can't be more than four or five weeks old. She needs medical attention,

not just warmth and food. A kitten that young will need around the clock feeding and cat formula. And she'll probably need deworming and some kind of flea treatment. Those aren't things you should be doing for her without a vet's instructions. And honestly, with the state she's in, the vet will probably recommend putting her to sleep."

Janelle held the kitten close, glaring at him. With a vehemence that she didn't know she possessed, she said, "I will not let *anyone* try to kill this baby. Someone already tried to *throw her away*, like she was trash!" That comment hit way too close to home, and Janelle felt herself tearing up. She glared at the pavement. "This baby is *mine* now."

He sighed. "I'm sorry, okay? I didn't mean it like that. I wouldn't want her put to sleep either. But if she's yours now, then you need to do right by her, and take her to a vet. I can drive you if you don't have a car. There's a vet not far from my apartment. I think they open at seven." He held his hand out and said, "I'm Mackenzie Brooks, by the way. Everyone calls me Mack."

She tilted her head to the side, looking up at his face. That name was more than a little familiar, and now that the sun had started peeking over the horizon, she recognized him. He was the quarterback of their school's football team. "Big Mack?"

An embarrassed little chuckle came out of him. "Yeah, that's what they call me."

She took his hand and shook it. "I went to every home game." Her cheeks heated up. She'd met some of the freshman football players, because Truman Hall housed most of the students who had sports scholarships. But she hadn't met any of the big-name players, and Big Mack had been instrumental in getting the team to the playoffs.

"Go Otters," he said. "And you are?"

"Janelle. Janelle Foster."

"Nice to meet you, Janelle."

"Are you sure you don't mind taking me to the vet? I mean,

I'm sure you've got other things to do with your time. Finals are next week."

He shrugged. "I'm already up, and I'm free until noon. I was just going to make some calls to let the housing department know about the switch. I was the R.A. last year, so there shouldn't be any issues with me standing in. I can make those calls from anywhere, so it's not a problem."

She looked back at the dorms and then at him with a hopeful expression. "Can I bring the kitten inside until seven?"

"Just until seven." He dug a lanyard with a card out of his pocket. "Chris' badge." He held it against the electronic sensor by the door and then opened it for her. "What room are you in?" he asked as she walked past him.

"One-fifteen," she answered, walking down the hall.

"Okay, I'll come knock on your door at six-thirty. Try to find a shoebox or something for the kitten to travel in."

"I will! And thank you again."

He waved and walked the other direction down the hall to the R.A.'s room right off the lobby.

Janelle took her shivering bundle to her room, hoping that her roommate would be too excited about the kitten to complain about being woken up so early.

"Julie?" She heard her roommate stir in the darkened room. "Julie? Are you awake?"

"What's wrong?" Julie mumbled.

"I found a kitty in the dumpster."

She heard a rustle, and then Julie's desk lamp came on, bathing the dorm room in a soft glow. "Are you shitting me?" Julie demanded.

Janelle walked closer so that Julie could see the little ball of fur she was holding in one hand against her chest. Her roommate was studying to be a vet, so she was confident that Julie could help her figure out what she was supposed to do.

"Oh my God, Janelle, it's so tiny!"

"I know. And really cold. Do you think I should warm it up with a bath so she can get clean? Or would that be too much of a shock for her little system?"

Julie tossed the covers back and said with confidence, "That would be more traumatic than helpful right now. We need to get her warm without terrifying her. I still have that heating pad from when I hurt my back. We'll set it to low, wrap her in a towel and put her on it."

"That's a great idea. Thank you."

While Julie got the heating pad out of one of her drawers, Janelle went and got a bath towel and a hand towel. She spread the bath towel on her bed, and wrapped the hand towel around the kitten's back. It hissed at her for her efforts.

Julie plugged in the heating pad, stuck it under the bath towel, and put her hand on it to test the heat as it warmed up. "That shouldn't be too hot."

Janelle set the kitten on top of the heating pad and then put the hand towel over it like a blanket, allowing its head to stick out.

The kitten took a few steps away from them and then started kneading the warm towel with both front paws as it searched the area with its nose.

"It's looking for a nipple," Julie said.

"Should we go to the cafeteria and get her some cream?" Janelle asked

Julie shook her head. "Cow's milk isn't great for cats. She looks almost old enough for canned cat food, but we don't know if she's been weaned yet."

"I guess she'll have to wait," Janelle said, unhappy with that answer but not knowing what else to do. She didn't want to feed it something that would do more harm than good. "I'm taking her to the vet in an hour."

"We could give her a little warm water," Julie said.

"That's a good idea. I have that little dropper thing that came



with my cough syrup last month, but I never used it. We could put a little water in that."

"If you get the dropper, I'll go down the hall for the warm water while you watch her."

"Okay."

Julie slipped on her robe and went out the door.

Five minutes later, Janelle held the dropper with warm water in front of the kitten's nose, but the kitten ignored it.

"I'll hold her head," Julie said. "Then you can put the dropper in her mouth and put a tiny drip on her tongue. See if she wants more after that?"

Janelle nodded, and once the kitten had a small taste, it sought out more, licking the dropper.

After giving her one fourth of a syringe full, Julie said, "That's probably enough for now. If she's not eating solid food, the water's not that good for her."

"Okay." Janelle set the dropper aside.

Within seconds, the kitten was curled up on the warm towel, with its eyes closed.

They heard a tiny rumble from it, and Julie whispered, "She's purring."

"Aw, that's so cute," Janelle cooed.

"Especially when she's so...gross."

"She's not gross!" Janelle protested.

"She kind of is," Julie answered, lifting the hand towel a little to look at the kitten. "But it's nothing a bath won't fix. I can't even tell if she's gray or just coated in something that makes her look gray. Ash maybe?"

Janelle shrugged. "I don't know."

Julie tucked the towel back around the tiny body and asked, "But other than being filthy, she looks like she's had enough food, so the abandonment must be recent. What vet are you taking her to?"

"I'm not sure." Janelle went into her meeting with Mack, his

offer to drive her, and the news about Chris' mom being in the hospital.

After Julie got past the shock of finding out that Big Mack was going to be her personal chauffeur and their R.A. for a while, Julie had to get ready for class.

Once her roommate had left, Janelle noted that she had some time to do some sit-ups and pushups while the kitten slept to make up for missing her normal morning routine.

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AT EXACTLY SIX-THIRTY, there was a soft knock on Janelle's door.

She opened it and waved Mack in. "Come in, and I'll get her ready."

"I checked the website," Mack said. "The vet does open at seven."

"Great. I found a shoebox for her," she said, pointing to the cardboard box on the bed. Then she unplugged the heating pad and carefully lifted the kitten, in the hand towel, and placed her in the box, while the kitten hissed.

"Still feisty, I see," Mack said with a smile.

"She is." Janelle grinned, closed the flip lid to the box, and picked it up. "Ready."

"I'm parked in the big lot on Eleventh."

"Okay."

They walked side by side down the hall and out the door. Once they were on the sidewalk, Mack said, "I was thinking about your jogging routine."

"Okay," she said hesitantly, not knowing where he was going with that.

"I don't know if Chris was aware of your routine, but while I'm the R. A., I'm going to need you to either jog with a friend or wait until six to start."

Scowling with indignation, she snipped, "That's not really your call."

"Yeah, it is. Read the contract you signed for the dorms. You're required to be in the building from midnight to six a.m., unless otherwise authorized, and I don't authorize it."

She was definitely going to look that up, because she didn't believe it. But even if it was true, who the hell was he to come in and make that decision when she'd been running every morning all year long? "I see why they call you team mom," she muttered.

"What was that?" he asked sharply.

Ignoring the question, she said, "I need to run in the mornings." It wasn't an exaggeration. If she didn't run in the mornings, she was pretty sure she'd go crazy.

"That's fine. Get a running buddy, and I'll authorize it."

"But—"

He cut her off. "And no one calls me team mom to my face. The last guy who did, had a fist sized bruise on his shoulder for a week."

"Real nice, because violence solves everything," she muttered in an icy tone.

"Not everything." He shrugged. "But it solves more things than you might imagine."

They were quiet for a few moments while Janelle seethed and tried to come up with a running partner. Her roommate Julie was crap at running. Her sport was swimming. There were some of Janelle's teammates on track who could keep up with her for a while, but most of them were more interested in short sprints than long distances. Her contemplation was cut off when Mack spoke.

"If you don't have a running buddy, I can go with you in the mornings."

"I doubt you could keep up," she snipped, still irritated, even though he was offering a solution to her problem.

"I don't think that's true. My legs are a lot longer than yours. You'd have to take two steps for every one of mine."

She scoffed. "Yes, of course, you can beat me at a sprint, but your size will catch up to you after the first four or five miles. You'll get tired, and then I'll catch up and pass you. People over six feet rarely win marathons."

"Point taken. But I can keep up long enough to get to the track with you, and then we can jog at separate paces, but at least I'll know you're safe."

"I've been doing this *all year*," she said, hoping to get him to see how ridiculous he was being.

"Yeah, I'm sure you have. Telling me that you've been putting yourself in danger for months doesn't make me suddenly think it's a good idea just because nothing bad has happened yet. You can get a buddy, you can go with me, or you can wait until six."

Still annoyed, she said, "Fine. I'll go with you."

"Great." They were at the lot, and he pointed to a blue Honda. "That's mine."

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ON THE DRIVE to the vet, Janelle cracked the lid to the shoebox, stuck her hand in, and cupped the kitten's back to keep it warm.

Once they were on the road, Mack asked, "Is this your first year of college?"

"Yes. Is this your last year?" she responded.

"Well, I've been here for four years, but I still don't have quite enough credits to graduate. But I'm signed up for summer term to finish my last eight credits, and then I'll have my degree. What are you studying?"

"I'm a linguistics major."

"How many languages do you know?"

"I can speak English, Japanese, and Mandarin fluently, and I'm in the process of learning Korean."

"Wow, that's impressive," he said.

"What are you studying? Other than football, of course."

"Playing professional football is the goal, and I've got an offer on the table, but I can't really say much about that, because nothing has been signed yet. But if that doesn't work out, or if I get injured early on, I wouldn't hate being a coach. So I've taken classes that would eventually lead to a teaching degree."

"It's smart to have a backup plan."

"What would you do with your linguistics degree?" he asked.

"I'd like to be an interpreter, but if that doesn't work out, I could be a translator, which is more about written text than speaking, or I could teach languages to others."

"I guess that saying, 'those who can't do, teach' might apply to both of us someday."

She nodded in agreement but hoped not. After a short pause, she decided to ask about his nickname. "I get why they call you Big Mack, I mean, you're the quarterback, and your passes win the game half the time, but I don't get why they call you team mom behind your back. How did that start?"

Sighing, he said, "That unfortunate nickname started in my freshman year. A bunch of the guys were joking around and calling me Mack Daddy because I dated like three different girls in one week. I told them to knock it off, because I genuinely thought it was offensive. I'm not a pimp or a player, I just happened to go on a few dates that week. Anyway, I was telling this guy off for calling me that, and his friend muttered, 'More like Mack Mommy'." His scowl deepened. "I just like to make sure people are following the rules, and I like to make sure everyone's prepared before a game so that we can play our best. I thought people had stopped saying it, but apparently not."

Janelle's stomach did a little flip at the term 'Daddy'. She knew she had daddy issues. Lots and lots of legitimate daddy issues. But knowing that his teammates had dubbed him Mack Daddy at one point did things to her insides that were above and

beyond the normal longing for a better childhood. It went into kinky territory. But that was something she'd never confessed to anyone. She'd barely confessed it to herself.

Trying not to sound flustered, she said, "Being prepared isn't a bad thing. Neither is making people follow the rules."

Chuckling, he said, "You didn't seem to think so a few minutes ago, when I told you that you couldn't go jogging in the mornings."

"Oh," she muttered, blushing as she realized she had been pretty argumentative about following a rule, albeit a silly one in her opinion. "Sorry."

He shrugged. "It's fine. I'm used to people chafing when I enforce the rules. Just this year, two of the freshmen went to a frat party during the first month of fall term. I found out what was going on via Twitter, went to the party, and dragged them back to the dorms. They were *pissed*. Or at least they were until the next morning, when they found out the cops had shown up and they would have been arrested for underage drinking, which would have gotten them kicked off the team."

"That would have been bad," she agreed.

After another pause, he said, "Any plans for the summer?"

She shook her head. "Not really. I'll be headed home. My parents live about half an hour away. My stepfather owns a little convenience store, and whenever I'm home, I work for him."

"That's cool. You can keep busy, earn a little cash, and help out your family all at the same time."

"Yeah," she muttered, even though her mother had been making her work in the store for free since the age of ten. It was her duty. No one in her family would equate her working in the store with 'helping out'. Wanting to get the conversation away from herself, she asked, "What classes are you taking to finish your degree?"

Mack spent the rest of the ride to the vet talking about his classes and why he needed those specific ones.