

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (22 page)

Morgan couldn't imagine such big dogs interacting with cats—they looked like they could inhale them without even trying.

"The air's cooled down now," said Ellen, "so I'm going to let a few of them out to play. Will you be comfortable with that?"

"No problem."

Moments later, Morgan was surrounded by snorting, drooling canines with huge noses that snuffled curiously at waist height. She petted as many as she could reach, and they pressed in closer, vying for the attention. Some began licking her hands and her clothes. "Omigosh, it's like being in a herd of calves!"

"They're strong, and they're overwhelming if you're not used to it. Let me know if you're uncomfortable, okay?"

"I'm used to farm animals, so I'm okay—it's just that most cows and horses aren't trying to persuade me to pet them. If they get too pushy, I'll push back. They just need to know the boundaries."

"Exactly. Here, let's walk out to the field and maybe they'll spread out a bit."

As they passed the last pen, Morgan caught sight of a long, dark tail hanging out of a doghouse. It was hard to see in the shadowed interior, but she could just make out the enormous bulk of a dog. Maybe she sensed something or it was the dog's body language—facing into the house as if it was uninterested in the outside world—but she stopped in front of the gate. "What about that one?"

Ellen sighed. "That's Fred. His owner died on a Tuesday, and the family took Fred to a shelter on Thursday. I don't know if they just couldn't cope with a dog this size—which is understandable, it's a lot to take on—or they just weren't interested in trying. But the shelter called us, and he's been here for over a month and a half now, just like that. Hardly eats, hardly moves."

"Animals grieve," said Morgan. "In fact, dogs may mourn as deeply as humans do. And it's so hard because you can't explain to them what's going on. He's lost his owner and his home in one fell swoop. Is he an older dog?"

"Not at all. He's about four. I thought if I just gave him some time, he'd snap out of it. Thought he would be running and playing by now, or at least show some interest in something. But nothing yet. Got a vet to come out here and check on him—in fact, I think it was Dr. Grady from your clinic—but Fred's healthy enough. He's lost some weight, though. I try to spend time with him, but he's not interested. He's just not

responding. He needs to find his forever home, but at this rate, I can't see it happening anytime soon."

"Can I meet him?"

"Sure. He doesn't seem to be territorial—hell, he doesn't seem to be much of anything right now—so he doesn't mind a stranger in his pen. I'll take the rest of the crowd out to the field. I've got a few tennis balls that'll keep 'em occupied while you visit."

Morgan stood by the enclosure until Ellen and the dogs left. It took a while, since a few dogs came back to see if she was coming too. She noticed that, while definitely enthusiastic, none of them bounced like Labradors. Their gait was almost dignified, and for a moment her heart squeezed hard as she remembered watching Rhyswr walk around her farm with that same stately pace.

Okay, Rhyswr, wherever you are. Let's see if this is a dog I can help.

"Hi, Fred," she called out softly to the unmoving dog in the doghouse. There was no reaction, but she hadn't expected one. She continued in the same soft, steady voice. "I know you're sad right now, and that's okay. I understand that. I was sad for a long time when Nainie died, and some days I still feel sad about it, even though she's been gone for a while. It sucks, I know, but that's the way it is when someone you love is gone." She entered the gate, continuing to talk. "I'm just coming in to sit with you for a while. I hope that's okay with you." She moved slowly toward the doghouse but took a wide arcing path rather than a direct route that might be perceived as threatening. She kept talking, soft and low, as she reached the doghouse and sat down on the ground beside it. The tail hung over the threshold of the door, utterly unmoving.

Morgan talked about Rhyswr and how she missed him. How she was trying to move forward by being open to adopting another dog. She found herself talking about Rhys too. Here in the peaceful shade, without a sound except for the noisy breathing of the big dog and a slight breeze stirring the leaves above, her feelings for Rhys seemed simple, natural, normal. If it wasn't for his crazy story, she could see herself getting a whole lot closer to him.

"What a mess, Fred," she sighed. "If Rhys believes his own fantasy, then he's seriously disturbed. If he's just making it up on purpose, then he's got something to hide. Either way, I can't see having a real relationship with him."

Except that she wanted to. Common sense said no, but the heart said
yes, yes, yes

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"Nainie always said that I should follow my heart. Well, my heart says that Rhys and I have feelings for each other. My gut says it's okay to trust him. My hormones want to jump him every time I'm near him. But my brain says that the idea of getting involved with Rhys is the stupidest thing it's ever heard." She sighed again. "So far, I've been listening to my brain, but the rest of me would like to stage a revolt.

"How about you, Fred? Want to weigh in with an opinion?"

The dog's tail never moved, not once. And she still hadn't seen anything but his back end. The rest of him was lost in the cool, cave-like shadow of his house. Fred might have two heads for all she knew.

Morgan glanced at her watch—an hour had sped by. It was a wonder she hadn't talked the big dog's ears off. "Well, I guess our time's up for now. Thanks for listening, Fred. And if it's okay with you, I'd like to make an appointment for another session." She got up stiffly and dusted off her jeans, then stretched until a joint popped. "Omigosh, you might have to get a couch if we're going to do this often... Can't complain about the rates, though."

FIFTEEN

M

organ pulled into the movie rental shop on the way home. Most couples got to know each other slowly by hanging out together. Maybe if she and Rhys shared some normal dating activities, she'd get to know more about him. And maybe then her brain would quit complaining long enough for the rest of her to get to know Rhys too.

She nearly gave up the whole idea as she tried to select a title. What would Rhys enjoy watching? She didn't know a darn thing about his taste. Jay would pick the latest alien invasion or zombie outbreak flick. Grady preferred war movies. None of those seemed quite right, somehow. She wasn't up for a romantic comedy, not everyone was crazy about animated features, and a docudrama might put the man to sleep. Morgan wandered the new release section and then all the other sections, until her eyes started to blur. Finally, she decided to just get an assortment of fun old standbys and let Rhys choose. Who knew, maybe his choice would tell her something about him. It'd be a conversation starter at the very least, and since they would both have seen the movies before, they could talk all the way through the films if they wanted to and never miss a thing. If she was really lucky, one of the films would prompt a memory from him—*the first time I saw this movie, I was in*

...

With six movies in a bag, she walked next door to Gibby's and ordered a couple of pizzas. At least that selection wasn't hard. As far as she could tell, Rhys wasn't picky about food, so she ordered two of her own favorites that she could simply cook in the oven at home—Pepperoni Supreme and Juanita's Taco Special.

If the evening's a bust, I'll have enough leftovers to last me a week.

When she went out to the barn to invite Rhys, he was nowhere to be seen. Lucy was in her stall, and the dribbles of grass in the corners of her mouth told Morgan that the horse had been out recently. All her dressings were clean and fresh, so obviously Rhys had gone off to work on something else.

Morgan checked around the buildings and finally spotted the man by the pond. He was crouched at its edge, feeding a little flock of black-and-white ducks. "Omigosh, where did you find these?"

“Leo had the idea of going to a feedstore,” Rhys grinned. “They knew of someone who had a few ducks to sell. These are called Ancona ducks.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen this breed, but I love the look of them.” She took the crumbles of feed he offered her and knelt beside him. The spotted ducks were obviously used to people—they came to her without hesitation. Morgan laughed at the feel of their nibbling bills on her palms.

“They don’t grow very big, but a pair of them would make a good dinner,” said Rhys.

“You’re
not

eating them!” She looked up, horrified, only to find him grinning at her. She reached over and punched him in the leg, and he laughed.

“Then perhaps you’d let me keep them to eat the slugs from the gardens.”

“That’s better,” she said. “Although there are no slugs in the garden right now—wait, did you say gardens, plural?”

“I’ve uncovered the soil in two more places where the sun is good and made them ready for planting in the spring. Leo says he’ll show me how to start seeds in his greenhouse. In the spring he’ll help me build one over by your garage, if it pleases you.”

“It pleases me plenty,” she admitted, but the pleasure came from far more than the greenhouse plans. Rhys planned to be here in the spring. He

wanted

to be here. More than that,

she

wanted him to be here. Her brain still disapproved, but maybe tonight’s activities would remedy that.

“I’ve always wanted to have time for things like gardening.”

“Perhaps with the new vet you’ve hired, you’ll find more time for pleasures.” He extended a hand and helped her up, then kissed her soundly.

She could think of all kinds of pleasures she’d like to find time for...Instead, she cleared her throat as she tried to clear her head. “I have time tonight for pizza and movies. Want to join me?”

His face lit up, and she could swear her already sensitized hormones fainted dead away. “Very much,” he said. “I’ll give Lucy her grain and clean myself up.” He walked away, and her gaze automatically followed him until he was out of sight.

Best. Butt. Ever.

Sighing, she didn’t even try to wipe the goofy grin off her face as she headed for the house to put the pizzas in the oven.

Rhys came to the door just before the food was ready. He was wearing clean clothes and his hair was wet—and she immediately had to deal with mental images of
hot naked man in the

shower

. It didn't help that her imagination didn't have to make up a single thing, thanks to Rhys's state of undress when she first met him.

Needing a few moments to compose herself (and for her brain to lecture her unruly libido), Morgan handed him a couple of iced colas and a roll of paper towels and sent him to the living room while she pulled out the pizzas. She cut them up and arranged slices of both flavors on each plate—seconds could be self-served in the kitchen—and followed. Rhys was studying the DVDs, which were spread out on the coffee table.

"Did you decide what you'd like to watch?" she asked as she handed him a plate. He hadn't sat on one end of the couch or the other—instead, he'd sat dead center. Should she ask him to move over or just sit beside him and enjoy the proximity?

Well, that's a no-brainer.

"I think I'd like to try this one." He held up

Jaws

.

"

Try.

Good one. You mean you'd like to see it again?"

"I've never watched it."

She stared. "You're pulling my leg."

"No, but I can if you want me to," he shot back with a grin.

She swatted his shoulder and took the DVD out of his hands. Moments later they were eating pizza on the couch while a giant shark ate swimmers on-screen. Morgan watched Rhys with interest. He was leaning forward, giving the film his full attention. He seemed surprised at every development too (although truth be told, the movie still managed to make her jump at times as well). Was it possible he really

hadn't

seen it before? Where on earth could a person hide in order to miss such a huge chunk of pop culture? Wales wasn't cut off from the rest of the world—unless Rhys had been in a monastery, and there weren't many of

those

still operating.

Besides, his behavior in other areas wasn't monkish in the least. By the time the movie was halfway through, they were cuddled up together as naturally as if they did this all the time. She could certainly get used to it...

And she could certainly get used to the post-movie activity. The embers that had been glowing all along flared into blazing life as soon as the credits rolled. Gentle kisses heated quickly and hands slid beneath clothing. Morgan wanted nothing more than to be skin to skin with this man, but some last living brain cell had her coming up for air instead and gently but firmly pushing free of Rhys's muscled arms.

They kept hold of each other's hands, however, as they sat back and tried to slow their heart rates. Rhys's amber gaze was warm on hers. "You're undoing me."

"Then we're even," she said. "I've been undone since I first dreamed of you."

He sat up. "You've seen me in your dreams?"