

LBRIS

We know  
books

ALSO BY ABBY JIMENEZ

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**ABBY  
JIMENEZ**  
**say you'll  
remember  
me**



PIATKUS

**XAVIER**

YOU WANT ME to do what?" I asked.

The middle-aged woman stood on the other side of the exam table, her dog between us. He was looking back and forth at our faces like he understood the conversation. For his sake I sincerely hoped he didn't.

"I want you to put him down," she said.

"He's healthy," I replied.

"I know," she said, peering at him forlornly. "My mom took real good care of him before she passed."

"Then why?"

She breathed out a dramatic sigh. "It's what she wanted. She didn't want him to have to live the rest of his life without her. He'd miss her too much."

"He can bond with someone else."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. He's too old."

"He's *four*."

She looked me in the eye like she was about to argue with me over taking an expired coupon. "Look," she said. "I'm gonna level

with you. Me coming here was a compromise. My husband wanted to take him out in the woods and shoot him to save us the three hundred dollars. I told him that's not humane, and that Mom would have wanted him to go peacefully, so here we are. But if you won't do it, he will—and he's not a very good shot. Might take a few tries."

I stared at her blankly. This is why I hated humans. They were the worst animals on the planet.

The dog looked up at me with sad eyes. "It's four hundred for euthanasia," I said flatly.

It wasn't. It was three hundred. For everyone but her.

She agreed to the cost, and I took the dog and did what I had to do.

An hour later I was sitting in the back room, charting the visit, more irritable than usual by the event.

Tina, one of my vet techs, was standing there glaring at me with her arms crossed.

"What?" I said, without looking up.

"You know what."

I shot her a look.

"What am I supposed to give her when she comes back for his ashes?" she asked, cocking her head.

"Do you have a fireplace?" I asked.

"No."

"A charcoal grill?"

She twisted her face thinking about it. "I think it's gas."

Maggie, my other tech, opened the cabinet and put a file away. "Didn't we cremate that one rescue dog that didn't make it? The St. Bernard mix?" she said. "We can give her those."

"Fine," I said. "But give her half. It's too much."

Tina was scratching the very not-dead dog's chin. "What are you gonna name him?" she asked.

"I have no idea," I mumbled, standing.

I was getting a headache. Clenching my teeth.

"I need you to cut his hair," I said. "Give him a schnauzer cut or something. Make him look different."

"But he's so cute fluffy!" Tina said.

I made pointed eye contact with both of them. "I don't think I need to remind you that I could lose my license for what I just did."

Tina looked at me adoringly. "We know. You're such a hero."

Maggie was biting her lip and nodding.

They were smiling at me. Beaming actually.

It made me more irritable.

"Do not take any pictures of this dog," I said. "No social media. Don't call him by his name. We don't breathe a word of this to anyone."

"We'll take it to the *grave*," Tina said, clutching her hands at her chest.

"I'd lie for you in court," Maggie said. "Hand on the Bible and everything."

Tina nodded emphatically.

"I know you don't like to hear it," Maggie said. "But you are truly one of the best people I know, Dr. Rush. It's an honor to work for you."

I frowned at the compliment. I didn't like flattery or praise.

I did like dogs, though. I liked all animals, but especially dogs. We didn't deserve them—and some people deserved them less than others.

"You have one more patient in room six," Maggie said. "And God bless you, Dr. Rush."

I gave her one more flat look, then I grabbed the tablet she handed me as I walked out. They smiled after me.

They'd never tell anyone. I trusted my team with my life—or in this case my license. But I didn't need all the fawning over me.

I walked into room six reading the chart. Patient was an abandoned kitten, found a few hours before in a wood pile.

"I'm Dr. Rush," I mumbled, coming in without looking up.

I went to the sink to wash my hands. I shut off the water, took a paper towel, and turned to look at the woman sitting there. Instant jolt of surprise when I saw her.

She was beautiful. My age, maybe twenty-eight, twenty-nine. Long black hair, brown eyes. Curvy.

She had the kitten in her bra. It was tucked in her cleavage sleeping, its chin balanced in the V of her shirt.

"Hey, doc," she said, standing. "Hold on, let me get her. I think she's a her? I'm not really good at looking at little kitty bits."

She pulled the white-and-brown fluff ball out and set her on the table between us. It was purring.

I'd probably be purring too if I'd been in there.

I cleared my throat and started my exam.

"About five weeks old," I said, my voice low.

The kitten's gums looked good and pink, eyes were clear. It was underweight. No fleas. Looked in its ears. Mites, but not too bad. I felt the abdomen. Bent its legs and ran my fingers down its spine to check for abnormalities.

The woman was watching me. I couldn't explain why, but it made me self-conscious.

*Nothing* made me self-conscious.

But for some reason her eyes on me made me wonder whether I'd shaved this morning.

I could smell the kitten. It smelled like her. Like flowers.

"Are you keeping it?" I asked.

She leaned on the exam table. "I mean, yeah. You don't turn down the cat distribution system."

The corner of my lip twitched.

"Did you check around?" I asked, listening to the kitten's lungs. "Make sure there weren't any others?"

"Yeah. Just this one." She gazed at me through thick lashes and smiled.

My heart picked up. My *God* this woman was gorgeous. I did my best to act like I didn't notice.

I put my stethoscope around my neck and went to take the kitten's temperature, trying to act like I was unaffected by her watching me.

When I lifted the tail, I froze.

I raised my eyes to the woman, and she peered back at me. "What?"

"I'd like to get some imaging."

A half an hour later the scans were done, and I was there to deliver the bad news.

"The kitten has a congenital condition," I said. "It's called atresia ani. It's when the rectum and anus don't fully develop."

She blinked at me, then at the kitten back in her shirt. "I'm sorry. What?"

"She doesn't have a functional anus or a rectum."

She stared. "You're saying this kitten doesn't have a butthole?"

"That is what I am saying."

She pulled the cat out of her bra and lifted its tail. Her eyes went wide. There was a little fleshy bald spot where the anus should be, but barely a pinprick of an opening. It was easy to miss if you weren't looking right at it.

"But...but she poops," she said. "She's used the litter box."

"She's developed a rectovaginal fistula. She passes feces through her vulva. She has stomach parasites, so her stools are watery. This is likely the only reason she's survived as long as she has. There's a surgery that could potentially correct this. I don't do it. She'd need to be seen by a specialist, a board-certified veterinary surgeon."

She nodded. "Okay. How much is that?" she asked.

"It runs between five to ten thousand dollars."

Her mouth fell open.

"My recommendation is to put her down," I said.

She studied the floor a moment before coming back to me. "But...but she's *happy*. She's a happy baby. I'm not putting her down."

"Miss—I'm sorry, what is your name?" I asked.

"Samantha. Diaz."

"Miss Diaz, one of two things is going to happen here. She will become impacted, she will suffer, and she will die. Or she will get an infection, she will suffer, and she will die. Even with the surgery, the prognosis is guarded at best. She'll need round-the-clock care until she's recovered—"

"I work from home. I can do that."

"There's often further complications that will require additional investment. If you're not able to or interested in getting her the surgical procedure, I strongly recommend euthanasia."

She clutched the kitten to her breast. "I *can't*."

"So you'd like the referral to the surgeon?"

"I don't have that kind of money. Is there a rescue that could help?"

"It's kitten season," I said. "The rescues are inundated. And they can save a hundred kittens with the funds it would take to *maybe*

save this one. You could certainly reach out to a few and ask, but I think it's unlikely they'll be able to help. I recommend putting her down," I repeated. "Immediately. Before she's in pain. Do you have any more questions for me? If not, I can give you some time to say goodbye."

She stared at me. "I will *not* be putting this cat down."

Maybe the knee-jerk annoyance I felt was an overreaction. Maybe it was just the end of a rough day at the end of a very long week and I was already frustrated by the dog situation from earlier, but I couldn't contain my irritation.

I crossed my arms. "Why bother to come ask for my expertise if you don't intend to take my advice?"

She blinked at me. "There have to be other options—"

"There aren't. So what is your plan?"

"I...I don't know..."

"So it's the suffering then. Got it."

She gawked at me. I didn't care.

I had seen every evil known to man walk through these doors but most of all I was tired of the selfishness and general stupidity I witnessed on a daily basis. The animals that should live, they want to put down, the ones who will suffer, they want to keep alive. They neglect and abuse them, they don't spay and neuter so the shelters overflow, they dump them, get tired of the responsibility, and abandon them. Well-intentioned stupidity is still stupidity. She was going to prolong this animal's misery. I hated it and for some reason I also hated that it lowered my opinion of her. I think out of everything, that was bothering me the most.

"Anything else?" I asked. "Or are we done?"

Her eyes flashed. "Has anyone ever told you your bedside manner could use some work?"

“As a matter of fact, they have,” I said. I pushed off the exam table. “Let me know when she stops eating, her stomach distends, and she’s in enough agony for you to make the hard choices that come with pet ownership.”

I walked out.

She followed me.

“What makes you think that I can’t fundraise this money?” she said to my back.

I scoffed. “Human nature?” I said, handing a wide-eyed Maggie the tablet on my way to the office.

“People are inherently good,” she said after me. “They *want* to help.”

I turned and pinned her with a stare. “People are inherently assholes.”

“Yeah?” she said. “Well, so are you.”

She stood there, her cheeks pink, the kitten’s head poking out of the top of her cleavage. Sexy.

I don’t know why that’s what I thought of in this moment, but sexy was all I could process.

“Fair enough,” I said.

I went to my office and closed the door.

## SAMANTHA

YOU ACTUALLY DID it,” Jeneva said.

“Nothing motivates me more than being told I can’t do something.”

My sister chuckled.

It was four days after the visit with Dr. Asshole. The GoFundMe had almost nine thousand dollars in it.

Pooter was playing with the jingly cat ball I got her in my living room. She’d swat it, then chase it across the floor and pounce on it. I smiled at her on my way to the couch.

“Did you know it was going to go viral?” Jeneva asked.

I shrugged. “I mean, I can’t always be sure. But sort of. Cute baby animal in need, clear call to action, catchy slogan.”

“‘Pooter Needs a Poop Chute’ *was* genius...”

“It’s what I do.” I plopped onto the sofa with my iced coffee.

“I hope he sees it,” she said.

“I hope he sees it too. Dick. You know what’s even worse?”

“What?”

“He was like, seriously fucking hot. When he was being mean to me, he actually got hotter. Why am I like this?”

Jeneva clinked dishes around. “Did you write him a bad review?”

I dragged a throw blanket across my lap. “Nah. Honestly, I picked him because he had such good ratings. The reviews actually warn you that he’s all brilliant and crabby, some moody animal whisperer or something.”

“We do love a cranky king,” she said distractedly.

“I mean, I could see where he was coming from, he just didn’t have to be rude about it. I never get why white men are grumpy. Like, we’re living in a patriarchy. You’re the most privileged class on the face of the earth. You’re not walking to your car with your keys through your fingers like wolverine and you’ve got bodily autonomy, why the bad mood?”

“What did he look like?” she asked.

“Like if Rhysand from the ACOTAR series were a real person,” I said, putting my straw between my teeth.

“No...”

“I swear to God. Hold on, I’ll google him, see if I can find a picture.”

I put her on speaker and typed *Xavier Rush veterinarian* into the search bar and hit images.

A picture of him holding an award popped up on the American Veterinary Medical Association website. He’d been recognized last year for some gargantuan amount of volunteer hours treating rescue animals.

He looked irritated, like he didn’t want to be there. Handsome, but definitely a hostage situation.

“Here,” I said, sending her a screenshot.

I sipped my coffee while I waited for her to look at it.

“Oh yeah...” she said.

“If he doesn’t do the bat wings, tattoo thing for Halloween it’s a seriously missed opportunity,” I said.

“Do you think he smiles at the dogs at least?”

“Probably not.”

“My toxic trait is thinking I could change him,” she said.

“Ha. My toxic trait is not caring if I could change him.”

She laughed.

I could hear Mom come into the room in the background.

“Tell her hi,” I said.

“Samantha says hi.”

“Who?” I heard Mom say.

“Samantha,” Jeneva repeated.

Silence followed. Mom didn’t say hi back.

I stared at Pooter while I tried to get my feelings about this to flatten.

“How is she?” I asked.

“Fine.” Then to Mom, “I’m making you dinner. We’re having pasta. No, you don’t need to help, I got it.”

I reached under the sofa and pulled out my laptop to check the Pooter funds. This was the core source of my serotonin this week. Well, the kitten too. But the GoFundMe was a multipart success for me. It meant I could save my baby, it renewed my already high faith in humanity, and it meant Dr. Asshole was wrong, which was a petty kind of joy, but a solid one nonetheless.

The page loaded and I smiled. Almost ten thousand now. I was close enough that I felt comfortable scheduling the surgery. And just in time too. I was heading to California in six weeks and I’d have to take Pooter with me, so the sooner she started healing the better.

“I’m excited for you to see the house,” Jeneva said. “We’ve done a lot of repairs.”