

WHEN LUC MET SPOT

"You want a dog. You've always wanted a dog. You need a dog."

"I don't need a dog." Lucas Vasco slumped lower in his seat. He watched the traffic whizzing by the passenger window for a moment before turning his attention back to the pretty, dark-skinned woman sitting next to him. He tried not to scowl.

Mrs. Allen wasn't fooled, though.

"Don't pout," she said. She didn't even bother to look at him, guiding the big SUV through a turn as competently as she guided her husband and children.

"I can't take care of a dog," he said. "I'm an FBI Special Agent."

"Woohooo, mister big shot FBI Special Agent." She glanced at him then, her eyes dark and sharp behind her glasses. "Is it against the law for FBI Special Agents to have a dog now? I'll have to let Harry know." Harry was the youngest Allen. He'd just started with the Bureau and was still as bouncy as the new puppy he'd recently acquired.

Luc sighed and looked out the window again.

Mrs. Allen was quiet, letting him stew. Damn it, she knew him far too well. Mae Allen had welcomed him into her family more than 15 years ago, and she could still play him like a fiddle.

"I'm not home enough to take care of a dog," he told her when he couldn't stand the silence any longer.

"Well you should be." Her profile was firm.

"Look, Mrs. Allen--"

"Lucas!" She glared at him before turning her attention back to the road. "How many years have I known you?"

He tried to control his instinctive urge to hunch his shoulders.

"Um..."

"I have told you again and again to call me Mama like the rest of my kids. Knock off the "Mrs. Allen" crap. I'm getting damned sick and tired of hearing it from you." Her voice was raised and harder than normal, so he knew she was really upset.

Luc shook his head. They'd had this argument before. In his mind this woman was simply Mrs. Allen. Larger than life. Almost magical.

The silence stretched between them again.

"Okay." Mrs. Allen sighed and it sounded weary. A little defeated. "Okay. Call me whatever you want to call me, honey. I love you anyway."

He knew that he'd hurt her feelings, and he didn't know how to fix it.

"So tell me who's going to take care of this dog for me when I'm not home?" he asked, desperate to change the subject.

She was quiet for a moment longer, her lips tight. Then her face relaxed and so did he as he watched her decide to let it slide.

"You'll be home for a while, and then on desk duty for a couple of weeks," she pointed out.

"Yeah." Luc rubbed his leg where a bullet had gone through the meat of his thigh during an assignment gone wrong. A girl, Marie, had died. He rubbed the long scar on his left cheek, then deliberately shook himself, putting the memory away for now.

"I won't be out of the field forever," he said.

"But you are now. You'll have plenty of time to housebreak a puppy."

Luc straightened in his seat. Housebreak?

"And when you're back at work you can put in a dog door so the little thing can go in and out while you're away," she continued.

Dog door? "What about when I go undercover again?"

"You know as well as I do that it will be a while before you're undercover again," she said kindly.

He didn't think she knew everything that had gone down. He was positive she didn't know that Marie had died believing that he loved her. That even as she'd lain in his arms, bleeding out, he'd lied to her. He shook his head again.

No, Mrs. Allen didn't know everything. But her suspicions about what had happened probably explained her sudden obsession with getting him a dog.

"I'll go undercover again sometime," he said.

"Probably." She turned the SUV onto a small, rocky lane. "I don't like it, but you probably will. But my David will keep you in the office until you recover." She took her eyes off the pitted road to glare at him. "In all ways."

She was right. David Allen, the oldest Allen son, had pulled him off the streets back when Luc had been a tough, violent, teenager. Now David was Luc's supervisor at the FBI. The man defined responsibility and there was no way he'd send Luc back undercover for a while. Which meant that Justin Nêmes, Luc's sometimes partner, would be taking on the next assignment by himself. Another reason for guilt.

"Plenty of time to housebreak a dog, get it used to you," Mrs. Allen said. "Then if you have to, you can get somebody to watch it. Like the neighbor who comes and cleans your monstrosity of a house."

"Jane," he muttered. Yeah, Jane would probably do it, especially if he paid her. She was a single mother and needed the money. That brought to mind another consideration... "I don't think Liza likes dogs."

Mrs. Allen snorted inelegantly and steered the SUV around a particularly deep pothole. "Are you still dating that woman?"

"Yeah." And it was getting kind of serious. It was nice having someone who cared enough to hold onto you. And the sex was okay too.

Mrs. Allen was shaking her head. "Luc, you need to get rid of her. I know trouble when I see it, and she is nothing but."

"Mrs. A..."

"Stop!" She raised on finger in the air. "Are you going to let that woman boss you around when you don't even know where you two are heading?"

"No," Luc admitted.

"Okay then." She sounded satisfied. "Then don't let her tell you whether or not you can have a dog. You've always wanted a dog."

Luc groaned and closed his eyes for a moment. He was definitely losing this fight. Crossing his arms, he stared with ill-humor out the window. It was his own damn life. He should be able to say what happened in it.

A moment later, Mrs. Allen brought the SUV to a stop in front of a little farm house. She turned off the engine, then twisted to face him. "This will be good for you, Luc. Trust me."

"If you say so." And that was definitely a sulk in his voice. Apparently he had regressed to the age of sixteen.

Instead of being offended, Mrs. Allen laughed, throwing back her head. Luc couldn't help but grin as he watched her. Her close-cropped hair was splashed with grey now, and her gold glasses sparkled against her beautiful, clear skin. The lines on her face were from laughter, and suddenly he loved her so much that he had to give her a hug.

She didn't fight, just gave herself up to his embrace, her own arms strong around him.

"It will be good for you," she said, still laughing. "You trust me, boy. And if that Jane woman won't watch the dog when you need her, there's always doggy daycare."

Luc pulled back to look at her. "You're kidding. There's really something called doggy daycare?"

"Honey, just about any damn thing exists in this world if you look hard enough for it. Come on." She extracted herself from him and opened her door, jumping down from the big truck with the agility of a much younger woman.

Luc reluctantly followed.

Unsurprisingly, Mrs. Allen seemed to know exactly where she was going. Sometimes Luc thought the woman knew every damned person in the world. It didn't shock him at all to know that she knew the people who lived in this remote place.

Hands thrust into the pockets of his cargo pants, he wandered slowly in Mrs. Allen's wake. It was nice out here. Lots of land and growing things. He even thought he heard chickens. Now why the hell would somebody want to raise chickens when you could go down the grocery store and pick up whatever you wanted? Seemed like a lot of trouble.

Luc paused, thinking. He could have chickens. He had enough land around the Museum. It might be kind of cool to have some chickens.

He snorted and started walking again, shaking his head at his own lunacy. If getting somebody to watch a dog was hard, he could just imagine what it would be like to find someone to feed chickens.

He heard the puppies before he saw them. High whines, yips, barks. Playful growling. At least he thought it was playful. He rounded a corner and came to a stop at the edge of a large, fenced-in pen.

There appeared to be several black balls of fluff inside the pen barking and chasing each other. Every once in a while one would throw its head back and bay, then pounce on a fellow fur ball. They were definitely cute. What they weren't, was small. They looked like bear cubs frolicking.

"What the hell kind of dogs are those?" he asked without thinking.

"Lucas!" Mrs. Allen turned to frown at him, hands on her hips. "Don't mind him," she said to a woman standing next to her. "He has manners, but he never uses them."

The other woman, middle aged and sunburned, laughed. "Don't worry about that, Mae. You should hear my husband sometimes." She turned to Luc and stuck out her hand. When he took it, she gave it a hard shake and let it go. "You must be Luc. Mae's told me all about you. I'm Arlene Browning."

He studied her, seeing wispy blonde hair, well-worn jeans, and intelligent eyes.

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Browning."

"Call me Arlene." She nodded towards the puppies. "Those are Newfoundlands. Cute little buggers, aren't they?"

"Yes. Yes they are." Luc smiled politely then turned to Mrs. Allen.

"Newfoundlands? Are you insane? Do you know how big those dogs get?"

"I sure do." She pointed towards a large black lump lying outside the fence. As if realizing that it was the center of attention, the lump moved and rose onto its haunches. It was a dog. It was a big dog. It was a really big dog.

"That's Sadie," Mrs. Allen said. "She's the mother of this lot here."

"Mrs. Allen," Luc tried to get his thoughts in order. "That dog is freaking huge!"

"Don't swear. And you've got the land."

"Well, yeah. For now." Luc looked at Arlene Browning. "And those puppies are going to be as big as their mother?"

She smiled at him, proud. "For the most part. Some bigger, some smaller."

"Bigger. Jesus Christ." His mind boggled. "I won't need a dog door. I'll have to take a door off the hinges. That's the only way one would get through."

Both women laughed this time. "They squish," Arlene informed him. "So go on in and see what you think of them. See if any of them call to you."

He looked at her. "You just let anyone come in and pick one out?" he demanded, his cop instincts raised. Hell, he already felt protective of the little ankle-biters. They were so innocent. So happy, romping around their playpen.

Arlene shook her head. "No, we never do. But Mae vouched for you, and I know Mae. I trust her with my life. If you want one, it's yours."

He swallowed. "Today?"

She shrugged. "I've got their paperwork and they've had all of their shots. They're weaned, so if you want to take one now, that would be all right."

Luc started to tell her that it hadn't been a request, but he stopped when he realized Mrs. Allen was smiling at him with a maternal gentleness that made him nervous.

"I won't push you, Lucas," she said. Sweetness oozed from every pore. "It's up to you."

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, sure. You won't push me."

She actually batted her eyes at him.

By now four puppies were all standing by the fence, barking and whining for attention. He could hear them begging him to come in and play.

There was a fifth puppy in the pen, but it was not standing at the fence. It was sitting a few feet away from the others, ears up, head cocked. And it was staring at him.

There was a knowing in that stare. An acknowledgment.

Luc shook his head. He was freaking losing his mind.

"Luc?" Mrs. Allen asked softly.

"Oh, hell."

Before he thought better of it, he slid through the gate into the pen. The four puppies who had been at the fence jumped on him immediately, licking and biting and barking.

"Watch your step!" Arlene called.

"Yeah, well, too late for that," Luc muttered, feeling something mush under his old running shoe.

He scraped off what he could on the grass, then bent to the four puppies surrounding him, ruffling fur and scratching ears while they went into ecstasy. He saw an old ball on the ground, so he threw it. The four puppies chased it in a mad dash across the pen.

While the four were off snarling over the ball, Luc straightened and went to the last puppy still sitting by itself. It was watching him through bright black eyes. A little pink tongue lolled as it panted. Luc kneeled in front of it.

"What the hell do you want?" he murmured. "What are you doing to me?" The puppy didn't move except to lean forward and sniff his fingers when he held them out to it.

"Who's this?" Luc called over his shoulder to the women. The other puppies brought the old ball back to him and he threw it again across pen. They chased after it.

Arlene had walked along the fence and now stood opposite him. "What color's the collar?" she asked.

"A bright pink. I think."

He looked up and saw Arlene nod, a smile of satisfaction on her face. "My youngest named that one Spot. Don't know why. He thought it was funny. She's a little girl."

"A girl." Carefully, Luc reached out and ruffled Spot's silky ears. She leaned into his touch and then, as if reaching a decision, got up, and basically climbed into his lap.

Luc grabbed the pup to hold her more securely. He felt her warmth, the thickness of her fur, her wriggling body when she tried to reach up and lick his chin. It felt...right.

He buried his face in the soft, black fur. A little of the emptiness that had been chilling his insides since the last botched assignment began to fill.

Mine.

"This one," he said, "I want this one."

"Huh." Arlene sounded satisfied and when he glanced at her again, she was smiling. "I wondered. This little girl's just been sitting around all day like she was waiting for someone. Guess she was waiting for you. I'll get the paperwork."

She left and Luc stood, his arms full of puppy. Spot snuggled into his hold, whining a little and licking him with sweet, bitey kisses. He ignored the other pups jumping and leaping around his knees and nuzzled her. Then he looked at Mrs. Allen. She had tears in her eyes while she watched him. He saw love for him glowing in her smile, her feelings obvious on her beautiful face.

"You need a dog," she said.

Luc nodded. "I do." The woman was always right. It was damned annoying.

"I told you to trust me."

"Yes," he said. "Thank you." Then he smiled too. "Mama Allen."