



Willow Springs Preview

"Meow."

Amy Bright stood next to the trunk of the old maple tree in her mother's front yard peering up into the branches, heavy and green with spring foliage. She could just barely make out the gray-and-white cat's tail peeking from between the leaves far above.

"Knightley, you come down from there right now," she said, head tilted back, her tone more encouraging than harsh. As frustrating as it was to have her cat stuck up a tree, she knew Mr. Knightley – named for the Jane Austen character – was probably frightened. And she hoped the sound of her voice might at once calm him and persuade him to make his way down.

But in response, her beloved kitty only let out another desperate-sounding "Meow."

Amy sighed, knowing what had to be done, much as she didn't want to do it. She'd been trying to lure the cat down for over half an hour, after all, and he hadn't budged. And he was on a branch way too high for her reach, even if she dared to climb.

So she pulled out her cell phone, cast a last annoyed glance up at the furry tail dangling overhead, and dialed her old friend Logan Whitaker, who happened to be a fireman. And who she also knew was on duty at the Destiny firehouse today.

"What's up, freckles?" he answered cheerfully, clearly having seen that it was her calling. But he probably wouldn't stay so cheerful when he heard the reason why.

"Well ... it's Mr. Knightley. He's stuck in my mom's maple tree."

Silence met her on the other end of the line before Logan finally replied in a dry voice. "You're kidding me, right?"

Because they'd had this conversation before. This wasn't the first cat rescue call she'd had to make to the Destiny Fire Department. Generally, Mr. Knightley was an indoor cat – and as a result, when he ended up outside for any reason, trouble often ensued. And she knew Logan disliked using town resources and taxpayer money to get her cat out of a tree, which she completely understood. But she still had to get Mr. Knightley down somehow, and if you couldn't call on one of your closest friends in the world for help, who could you call on? And it was a really tall tree.

"Mom was on catsitting duty this weekend while I went to Cincinnati with Rachel and Tessa." Both of her best girlfriends were getting married this summer and they'd gone on an overnight shopping trip, which had included a gown fitting for Rachel. And though Tessa's wedding would be a smaller affair than Rachel's, yesterday she'd succeeded in finding a simple lace dress that fit her slightly-Bohemian-yet-feminine fashion sense. "When I came by to pick him up," Amy went on, "he ran up the tree."

Now it was Logan who sighed, even as he said, "We're on our way. But one of these days, I'm buying you a leash for that cat."

"Thanks, Logan," she said with heartfelt sincerity before disconnecting. And though she had, of course, thought about a leash for Mr. Knightley's outdoor excursions, she just didn't like the idea. Life could hold you captive in so many ways – so she didn't like the notion of adding one more, even for her kitty.

As she waited for Logan then, an inexplicable sense of melancholy came washing over her. *Because your cat's up a tree? Because you were embarrassed to call the fire department?*

But no, it wasn't either of those things. It was ... life. The sense that it was passing her by.

She was thirty-four years old, after all, and other than a few trips to the city with her friends, she'd barely set foot outside Destiny. And now her friends were getting married, starting romantic new lives that would demote her to fifth wheel status. And as for romance of her own ... well, it had been painfully hard to come by and she had no reason to think that would change anytime soon.

Ugh. Stop this. It's not who you are. Amy was usually happy, upbeat, always finding the sunny side of any situation. She'd always been that way – thankful for the blessings life had brought her way, content and comfortable with her small-town Destiny existence. Joy came naturally to her. So at a moment like this, when sadness crept in, it left her disoriented and at a loss for how to deal with it.

Fortunately, though, her spirits were lifted when, a few minutes later, she looked up to see a red fire engine rumbling around the bend on Meadowview Highway where her mother's house was located. Logan's mom still lived in the small cottage next door – and though the home of Logan's best friend, Mike Romo, sat just a football field's length away up the road, the two small houses where Logan and Amy had grown up were located side by side, a stone's throw apart.

"Meow," Mr. Knightley said from above.

"Help's on the way," she called up into the leaves.

For both of them, she thought. Because seeing Logan would surely distract her from her weird mood and lift her spirits. *Everything will be fine.* She was sincerely happy for her girlfriends, after all. As the unofficial town matchmaker, Amy delighted in seeing other people find romance even if she herself had not.

A couple of the other local firemen lifted their hands in waves to her, but as Logan stepped off the truck in his firefighting gear, it was *his* smile that warmed her heart. He was a lot like her – a generally amiable guy who always looked on the bright side – so no wonder they had such a solid, longstanding friendship.

A moment later, Amy pointed out the cat tail high up in the tree. And as Logan moved back toward the fire engine, ready to extend the attached ladder, he said playfully over his shoulder, "Gonna owe me a piece of pie for this, freckles."

That was how they traditionally paid off favors to each other, with pie at Dolly's Main Street Café. "You got it," she told him.

Then she watched as Logan worked his magic – maneuvering the long ladder into the tree, toward the highest branches, soon disappearing up into the foliage himself, only his legs visible ... until he emerged with Mr. Knightley tucked securely in his arms.

Something about the sight sent a gentle pang of profound gratitude stretching through Amy's whole being. She knew she really had no reason to be feeling down, but getting her kitty safely back, delivered by the good, capable man she'd felt close to for her whole life seemed ... well, like the most wonderful gift life could give her at the moment. Sometimes it was the little things.

As Logan transferred the cat from his grasp into hers, their hands brushed together and she caught his musky male scent. "Thank you," she told him, meeting his blue eyes with her gaze and hoping it relayed the depth of her appreciation.

He tilted his head, offering up a half grin. "For you, freckles, anything." Then he pointed chidingly down at Mr. Knightley. "And you, stay out of trees."

Just then, the two-way radio attached to Logan's hip buzzed and, shifting immediately into work mode, he snatched it up and spoke into it to dispatch. "What's happening, Jeanie?"

"House fire on Whisper Falls Road," Jeanie said, the words masked just slightly with static. "Last house in the valley before you reach the bridge."

"Shit," Logan murmured to himself. "That's the Knight house." Everyone in Destiny knew the Knight family, and Logan's reaction reminded Amy that the Knights had been especially close with Logan's family back when she and Logan were kids.

"It's a bad one," Jeanie added then. "Better hurry."

As Logan rushed back to the engine, his concern evident in his stride, Amy called, "Thanks! And be careful!" behind him.

Maybe someday I'll be lucky enough to end up with ... a man that good. Maybe.

Although guys like Logan were few and far between, and as the red fire engine roared away a few seconds later, siren wailing, Amy knew in her heart that her chances for finding true love in Destiny were growing bleaker by the day.

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