



OUT OF THE PICTURE

TRACY GARDNER

The poodles scrambled wildly onto the porch, pulling Savanna smack into a tree. Well, not a tree, but a tall stranger who'd just stepped out the front door. Savanna looked up to find herself staring into the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. She watched them crinkle at the corners, making her suddenly aware she was standing there, gawking, mute. He had a shock of unruly black hair, cut close but longer on top, and a few faint freckles across his cheeks.

"Hello." His voice was deep and quiet. He placed one large hand lightly on her upper arm, steadying her as she stepped back.

After tripping over a leash, Savanna regained her balance. She looked down and found the poodles had taken the opportunity to weave themselves in and around both hers and the stranger's ankles.

She laughed, trying to extricate herself. "Here." She finally scooped up Duke. "Would you mind?" She handed the poodle to the man and he took it, smiling at her and making her more flustered. What was she doing? How did she

know this man would just hold a random dog? Too late now, she thought, unclipping Duke's leash and unwrapping it from their legs while Princess sprang into the air, pawing at Duke.

"Oh, gosh," Savanna murmured, capturing a squirming Princess and glancing up at the man again. "I'm so sorry!"

"Don't be." He laughed. "I love these two."

She frowned at him without meaning to. She thought she knew everyone in town; who was this man claiming to know Caroline's poodles? And why was his smile making her all warm and stupid inside?

"I'm Aidan. And you are ...not Sydney."

Savanna shook her head, disconcerted. How did he know Sydney? "I'm not. I'm Savanna. Shepherd."

Understanding dawned on him. "Aha! A third Shepherd sister!"

"Yes. How do you know my sisters?"

"We take our dog to Fancy Tails. And I've crossed paths with your sister picking up Caroline's poodles before. And your other sister Skylar is my attorney. Not that I need a lawyer," he interrupted himself. "Just, y'know, for things that come up. Nothing bad. Financial stuff. She's great. They're both great," he finished awkwardly.

Savanna heard one thing in Aidan's explanation, and it had nothing to do with him needing Skylar's services—*we*. As in, "We" take our dog to Fancy Tails.

This ridiculously cute man was taken. Of course. How could he not be?

He said, "Your sisters must be happy to have you back."

"I'm thrilled to be home. I haven't seen Caroline yet, so I offered to deliver these two." She gestured at the little dogs, now back on their leashes.

He nodded, stepping aside and holding the door open for

her. “It was nice meeting you.” The deep timbre of his voice sent a pleasant little zing through her.

Aidan who? But Savanna’s mother had raised her with good manners. There was no polite way she could ask him to define who he was to Caroline. “Nice meeting you too, Aidan.” She took his offered hand, surprised at how warm his was. She let go, noting that he held on just a beat longer.

“Maybe I’ll see you around.” He turned and headed down the front steps.