Rainy Day

by Katie Bloomer

Dark clouds rolled in overhead with the distant sound of thunder echoing across the city. The air was thick with anticipation, the scent of incoming rain overwhelming. It was almost enough to make Courtney gag. The small building before her now seemed to loom ominously like a giant, challenging her to pass through its dark doors into unknown territory. She thought about turning back. She hadn’t even left the car yet. She could easily just turn around, leave the parking lot and never look back. But this is what she wanted – what she needed – so she took a deep breath, gathered her courage and took one uneasy step at a time across the asphalt.

A small bell chimed as she passed through the twin glass doors, announcing her arrival to the young girl behind the front counter. Her head perked up with attention as a pearly-white smile quickly spread across her face.

“Welcome! How can I help you today?”

Courtney involuntarily froze in place, her nerves getting the best of her. The girl was patiently waiting for a response as Courtney stood there, her fidgeting hands the only sign of movement. She hadn’t been this nervous in awhile, and she felt a blush of embarrassment begin to creep up her cheeks. She tried to swallow her nerves and speak.

“Hi, I’m hoping to look at your cats?”

“Of course! Right this way,” the girl said with what sounded like genuine pleasure.

She led Courtney through a set of plastic double doors behind the counter and down a long corridor lined with wire fencing. The shelter doors must have been very well insulated, because Courtney was now bombarded with the echoing ruckus of dozens of eager dogs. She passed by several kennels containing all sorts of variety: different breeds, sizes, ages, temperaments. About halfway down the first row she spotted a semi-familiar face. A bright eyed beagle mix, still just a puppy.

Her eyes softened and the corner of her mouth perked up at the sight of this friendly stranger. He looked like Frodo, her companion for over ten years, who had recently left her in an empty house. The sight of him made her heart race and break all at once. This is why she was here – a companion. But not this dog. She didn’t want a reminder of past love, of past loss. She wanted something new, something she had never experienced before. So she was hoping to find a nice feline to occupy her time and her heart.

The girl led her through another set of doors, also well insulated, into a quiet room lined with much smaller cages. Here, Courtney realized first hand the difference between cats and dogs – while the dogs reared their heads eagerly to meet new people, these cats sat in silent indifference. This made her more nervous. When she met Frodo, it was love at first sight. But how would a cat react? How would she know which is “the one”?

“Have a look around and let me know if you’d like to interact with any,” the girl spoke abruptly, dragging Courtney back to reality. She smiled in response and began looking around, unsure what exactly she was looking for.

She walked up and down the rows of cages and inspected each cat like a hulking general inspects his soldiers. The quiet indifference she sensed when she first walked in was changed by the sight of many distinct personalities. As they became aware of her presence in the room, some cats came forward and beckoned her with small cries and extended paws, rubbing against their cage doors as she walked past. Others lounged peacefully; unaware or uncaring that she was there. Some even hid – or tried to hide in such confined spaces – and peered through the shadows with fearful eyes at her intruding presence.

But one in particular caught her eye. A large orange tabby with long soft fur and tufted ears sat waiting at his cage door, staring at her with bright yellow eyes as he patiently awaited her approach. The placard on his enclosure stated “Jack. Male. About 2-yrs old. Neutered.” Nothing more. She reached her finger through the door, and he bumped his forehead into it with closed eyes and a little chirp of greeting. She let out a small laugh. When Jack stood up to rub his cheek and neck against her, she noticed his absent back leg. He maneuvered himself back and forth in the small space with remarkable ease while he continued to rub against her finger.

Courtney called over the girl and asked if she could spend some time with Jack outside of his pen. The girl opened the door and picked him up with soft words of encouragement, to which he responded with a short meow of protest. She set him down on the cold concrete floor and Courtney lowered herself to sit next to him. He walked slowly around the open space, thoroughly inspecting it before taking interest in the two humans. Courtney talked with the girl while waiting for Jack with an outstretched hand, and the girl revealed a bit of what she knew about him.

“They found him as a stray dragging his leg, so they took him to the vet and they had to amputate it. They think he might have been hit by a car.”

“How long ago?”

“Bout six months or so. No one showed up to claim him, so they sent him here.”

All alone, in a cage, for half a year.

“Poor thing.” Courtney could feel her throat closing up and her eyes begin to water. She tried to swallow these rising emotions, not wanting to alarm the girl with a sudden flood of tears. *Don’t get too emotional,* Courtney reminded herself.

“He’s been doing well since then. Took him awhile to get used to three legs, but gets around fine now. He’s been a bit lethargic though, doesn’t like to play a lot. But he’s very sweet,” she said this with a smile as she watched Jack. Courtney could tell this girl really cared about him – about all the animals – and thought she would probably take them all home if she could.

Jack ambled over to Courtney and accepted her outstretched hand with another bump of the forehead and rub of the cheek. Courtney scratched the top of his head with a grin and asked the girl to get the paperwork.

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Jack sat silently curled up in a cardboard carrier in the passenger seat on the ride home. Courtney couldn’t see him through the small holes in the box, but imagined he was very nervous. And why wouldn’t he be? He was going to a strange, unknown place with a total stranger. Courtney was nervous too. She was bringing a complete stranger into her home.

They drove in awkward silence on the drive through downtown, the only sound coming from the radio weather station. It stated the impending rain might actually turn into snow. *Ugh! Please no more snow*, Courtney thought. She had grown to love Kansas City over the past two years – it was very similar to Atlanta, where she was born and raised, in many ways. But she still couldn’t get used to the cold. Especially so late in February, when she had expected it to warm up at least a little.

She was still a few blocks from home when the rain finally started to fall. She hated driving in the rain, and prayed the light sprinkle wouldn’t turn into a full-blown storm. But then the sound of distant thunder shook the car – shook the whole city – and Courtney gritted her teeth and gripped the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white.

“Don’t worry, we’re almost home,” she whispered to Jack.

When she pulled into her driveway the rain was coming down hard, and she groaned as she pulled up her hoodie and stepped out of the car. She quickly ran to unlock and open the broken electric garage door and pulled the car in before shutting out the rain. Her clothes were completely soaked and she shook herself off like a dog before reaching for Jack.

As she gently picked up his carrier she heard him meow softly, startled by the sudden movement. She cooed and murmured soothingly as she walked him inside, hoping to calm his nerves as well as her own. She entered through the kitchen and crossed the creaky floorboards to the carpeted living room to let Jack out, trying not to jostle him too much in the clunky carrier. She placed him on the floor, opened the top folds and waited patiently for him to pop out. As his ears slowly rose up and his eyes peered out, she smiled with pure excitement at the thought of finally welcoming her new companion.

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A couple weeks had passed since Courtney brought Jack home, and things weren’t exactly as she had expected. He took a few days to get used to his new environment – as we all do – and remained relatively cautious and suspicious. He walked around each room with his belly low to the ground, his three good legs poised and ready to sprint at the sign of any trouble. He kept his distance as he wandered around every new piece of furniture, as he smelled every new scent and discovered every new window through which he could gaze at the outside world.

She kept a weary eye on him as he adjusted and gave him the space he needed. She expected bringing a cat home and preemptively requested a week away from the office so she could be there with him. She worked with a team on website design, so she could do a good deal of work from home. When she worked on her laptop she sat on the ruff, dingy living room carpet, and would often talk aloud to him.

“Whatcha doing?”

No response. He was staring intently out the window from his perch on the back of the couch, tail flicking back and forth with anticipation.

“See something interesting?”

He responded to her question with a series of odd chirps aimed at whatever was outside. She couldn’t help but laugh at his strange bird-call, and got up from her work to join him in gazing out the window.

“Ah, lots of birdies today.” They were scattered everywhere across the front lawn. They fluttered about in intricate dances, frequently diving towards the ground to eat invisible grub. Whenever they came face to face they exchanged greetings briefly, and then flew off again. Jack’s wide eyes were darting frantically back-and-forth between all the action.

“Wish I could just stare out the window all day.” Courtney usually just stared at computer screens all day.

“Wish there was a better view though,” she sighed, eyes glazing over at the same old sight of an empty street and rows of identical houses.

She tried to scratch Jack’s head, but he was upset that she broke his concentration and jumped off to find some other form of entertainment.

She enjoyed getting to know Jack and watched as he slowly came out of his shell. The sad, quiet, cautious boy she met at the shelter quickly melted away to reveal a completely separate personality. A menace.

The new Jack was energetic and excited about everything. The few toys she had bought were quickly torn up by his sharp claws, not to mention the damage to her old carpeting and furniture. Whenever he was in an exceedingly playful mood he would even try climbing up her pant leg, most often when she had some tasty treat in her hand. He was quick on his feet, and to her amazement would zoom across the entire house at surprising speeds and would leap unfathomable distances and heights. Coming in and out of the house became a battle. He was wild at heart and, having grown bored of his interior surroundings, longed for the great outdoors. Whenever she came home and fumbled to unlock the door, he would appear at the doorway as if out of nowhere and try to squeeze through her feet.

He kept her up at night with his ruckus and she became fearful of leaving him alone. *God knows what he’ll destroy! Or how he could get hurt!!* These thoughts went with her every time she left the house.

The calm and quiet companion she had expected – one that would sit on her lap as she read on the couch, or curl up with her at bedtime – was actually an unstoppable ball of furry energy. She felt like her already chaotic life was only worsened by his presence, and she felt powerless to change the situation.

There was no way she could abandon him. She knew what that felt like. Her husband had left her all alone with nothing (except Frodo) and abandoned her for some other “perfect” woman. Courtney knew Jack wasn’t perfect – or even what she necessarily wanted – but she had to make this work. She just didn’t know how.

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One morning as Courtney was rushing off to work, the unthinkable happened. Jack escaped. She ran out the kitchen door with his favorite toy and a bowl of food to entice him, and spent hours scouring the neighborhood for him. All to no avail. He was nowhere to be found. She began to panic, bent over at the waist practically hyperventilating as she tried to catch her breath and control her thoughts. *My god! Where could he be? What if he’s dead or hurt or lost forever?!* Her mind tended to wonder to the worst possible scenario and she started to unravel as the tears began to fall down her cold, sweaty face.

Thinking of no other options she went back home, hoping he would have found his way back and would be waiting for her like a loyal dog. She was completely dumbfounded though when she actually discovered him there. He was sitting innocently by the front door with a dead (or half-dead) mouse by his feet. She calmly approached him, not wanting to accidently chase him off, and he willingly let her scoop him into her shaking arms. She whispered gentle reassurances as she carried him inside. Once the door was securely closed, she crumbled to the floor, her shaking legs no longer able to sustain her. As she tried to compose herself, Jack nonchalantly jumped from her arms and strolled over to his water bowl for a much needed refreshment. She was angry, but glad that he was home and safe.

After checking him over for any damage, she speedily grabbed her things and finally headed off to work. When she made it into the office, hours late, her boss was fuming. She tensed up at the sight of his bright red face and felt a knot in her throat. She didn’t protest as he escorted her into his office and slammed the door behind him.

“What happened?” he asked through clenched teeth.

“I’m so sorry, my cat got out of the house and I had to find him.”

He let out a long sigh and leaned against his desk, his anger subsiding into irritation. He crossed his arms in front of him as he tried to calm down and understand her situation.

“You couldn’t have at least called?”

“I was panicked, in a rush. I’m sorry.”

“You’ve done fine work here Courtney, but this is *completely* unacceptable. Being late is bad enough, but to not have the sense to call is even worse.”

She didn’t know how to respond and felt the warmth in her cheeks build to a fierce, fiery burn.

“This can’t happen again, understand?” he said with an irritated crook in his brow. He looked at her as though he were scolding a disobedient dog that just pissed in the house.

“Of course, I’m so sorry. It’ll never happen again,” she said, defeated.

When he eventually dismissed her, she curtly nodded her head, and shuffled to her desk with her head held low and hands clutched into strained white fists. She was terrified that her once friendly boss now hated her, and tried not to cry as she finished her work for the day.

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Despite her promise to her boss, her work continued to slip. She was terrified of leaving Jack alone to destroy her house or hurt himself, so she found more and more excuses to work from her laptop instead of in the office. Her teammates were growing frustrated with her for attending fewer of their meetings and thought that she wasn’t pulling her weight anymore. Her work also involved occasional business trips, but she started to rearrange those travel plans in order to accommodate Jack. Her clients weren’t happy about this, to say the least.

Her job had been the one thing keeping her together the past couple years. She had been married for almost seven years to her high school sweetheart. They met and got into a serious relationship when they were still young and went off to the same college together. They did the same things, ate the same foods, had the same friends, even worked in the same place. He was her everything. When he left, Frodo became her everything. Then he left her too, and her job became her everything. Now, she was failing that job, and feared she would soon lose it.

Her fears were realized one fateful morning in late March. She was drinking her morning coffee when Jack started gagging and throwing up in the kitchen. He’d had hair balls before (common for long haired cats) but nothing like this. She started running through all the different possibilities in her head and searched the internet for what she should do. She made sure to call one of her team members to let them know she’d miss their morning meeting, clutching the phone to her ear as she gingerly placed poor Jack in his carrier and rushed to the emergency vet.

She was terrified something was really wrong with him, and couldn’t stop herself from shaking. She was reminded of the time before Frodo passed. He was old, much older than Jack, and started deteriorating slowly as he got older. Losing Frodo was hard enough; what was worse was watching him slowly disappear, watching him suffer more and more. She felt completely helpless. She tried not to let herself collapse into total hysteria, and told herself that it was probably nothing. But those looming thoughts kept creeping in.

When she finally saw the vet and got him examined, she felt like a complete idiot. They told her it was probably just an upset stomach and to keep an eye out for any other signs like lethargy and disorientation. She was finally able to breathe again and felt relieved that he was okay. *It’s better to be safe than sorry,* she thought. When she got home, however, and checked her voicemail, everything changed. She lost her job.

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It was the straw that broke the camel’s back. She felt numbness overcome her as she soaked in the realization that her life was completely out of control. She lost her husband, her one closest friend for almost a decade. She left her family behind, her parents and five younger sisters, so she could start over with Frodo. She lost Frodo. She lost her job. Now, all she had left was her cat – more a menace than a comfort. She was growing resentful of him, of this situation, and for once stopped thinking about anything. Stopped thinking about the worst case scenario. This was it. Nothing could really be worse than this.

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After a day of lying around feeling sorry for herself, she started searching for more work. She scanned through past clients and partners she’d worked with, hoping to find something, anything. However, despite all her searching, nothing seemed promising. She did find some small freelance work, thankfully, but nothing stable. She had enough in savings to keep her for awhile thanks to her frugal saving efforts, but another problem arose: her time.

She was used to spending time on her work whenever she was stressed. Now, with less work and more stress, she needed something to occupy her time. She needed a distraction from her life falling apart around her.

It didn’t take long to find one. She looked around at the house she lived in and realized that she’d grown too comfortable in it. She had originally bought the house hoping to fix it up and flip it after about a year. That was over two years ago. *I guess I should start some work,* she thought. So she rolled up her sleeves, finally, and got to work.

She started by painting some walls – an easy task. Then she Googled and YouTubed how to fix the creaky floorboards and loose light fixtures, and even tried to fix a leaky sink. However, she quickly learned that house repair wasn’t really her forte, so she made the decision to bring in some help.

She found a local contractor with good reviews and decided to give them a call. The next day, a small group of three men showed up to look over the house. The leader of this trio came forward and introduced himself.

“Hi, I’m Chris.”

He reached out to shake hands, but Courtney was too busy staring. She’d never met such an attractive man. He was tall: very tall. She was a bit of a giant herself, about 5’9”, but he was even taller. He had messy brown hair that looked thick and soft, like a lion’s mane, and she resisted the urge to touch it. He had the most amazing smile, one that twinkled, like in the movies.

“Oh, Courtney,” she said, realizing he was still awkwardly waiting with his hand midair.

She felt herself begin to blush and hastily shook his hand and turned away so she would stop staring. As she showed them around, she realized how terrible the place still looked, and tried to suppress a groan of embarrassment at the sight of the pigsty she called home.

“Wow,” Chris mumbled as his wide eyes absorbed the state of the house. He was looking at the shower; the shower head was sticking too far out of the wall, loosely dangling and leaking more often than not; the walls were cracking and covered in guck that no amount of scrubbing could ever fix; the knob was completely useless, unable to accurately change between boiling hot and ice cold. “How… have you lived here?” He barely spoke above a whisper but she heard him.

“Ha, you should see the rest of my life,” she tried to laugh it off but felt the sting of truth in her words.

Chris just smiled back and chuckled, which she noticed made his large shoulders bounce slightly. Realizing that she must be staring again, she walked out to the kitchen to see what the others had to say. They were all stunned, mouths gaping, absolutely amazed that she had lived in such a dump for so long. They agreed to start work the very next day.

As she thanked them and walked them out, she caught one final glimpse of Chris’s dashing smile and couldn’t help but swoon a little. She closed the front door and let out a long sigh as she wondered if hiring such a hottie was really a good idea…

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Over the next few weeks while Chris and the gang helped repair the house, Courtney learned something new every day: about house repair and about the attractive Chris. He was strong and hardworking. He had inherited this business from his dad, who had recently retired, and had been raised doing the work. He was taught that doing hard work with your own hands was better than paying someone else.

“My dad’s the same way. Sorry to say I turned out a little disappointing in that area,” she commented as she watched him – the man she hired – repair a simple leaky faucet.

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” he reassured. “We can’t all do everything. Like, I can’t make my own website. I need help from someone like you. Same goes here,” he lifted his head from his work and looked at her. “I can even teach ya if ya want. That way you can do it next time.”

“Won’t that take away your business?” she said with a coy smile.

He laughed and wiped his hands as he stood up. He turned the knob on the kitchen sink and, ta-dah, it ran smoothly. “Don’t worry, just the basics. You’ll still need me for the big stuff.”

He wasn’t just all bulking manliness, she also found out he was very sweet and easygoing. He was easy to talk to, and always made her smile. He seemed to have a very positive outlook on everything, and that was a change of pace for Courtney the Spaz. Whenever something went wrong with the house Courtney would practically fall apart.

One time, a pipe in the bathroom burst and started soaking everything. Courtney screamed from surprise and instantly started pacing back and forth trying to avoid the spray and save her precious possessions. She panicked while Chris just laughed.

“Ya know, sometimes things go wrong, and you can’t control it. You just have to move forward with a clear head,” he said after successfully fixing the leak.

“Would you be saying that if you didn’t know how to fix a sink? What if it burst and you had no experience and couldn’t fix it?” she asked.

“Would freaking out solve anything?” He surprised her with that question. “It’s not the end of the world. Yeah, things might suck for awhile but it’ll get fixed eventually and life’ll move on.” He stated it like it was a well-known truth of life, but she’d never thought of things like that.

The more time she spent with him, the more she learned and the more her curiosity grew. And he seemed to enjoy spending time with her as well. He was friendly and always tried to strike up conversation, asking about her life and her work. *He’s just being friendly, professional, trying to keep me happy and keep my business,* she thought. But she often caught herself hoping it was something more, that he actually wanted to know her.

“So, you’re a cat person huh?”

Jack had just entered the room and was eyeing Chris suspiciously, unsure who this stranger was on his turf.

“Oh yeah, that’s Jack.”

“He’s gorgeous. How long you have him?” Chris tried to pet him as he crawled closer, but of course, Jack ran away.

“Couple months now. He’s a handful,” she said with an exasperated sigh.

“How so?”

“He just has a lot of energy, more than I expected. Scratches and chews on everything and never really settles down.”

Chris swiveled his head around, scanning the house for something.

“Don’t you have a cat tree somewhere?”

“A what?” she asked.

He grinned hesitantly, wondering if she was serious.

“You’ve never had a cat before, huh?”

“No, just dogs.” He must have thought she was an idiot by now, and she started chewing on her lip out of nervousness.

“Well, you should definitely get a tree or at least some scratching posts. Maybe some electric toys too. It could make a big difference.”

Turns out he was more than right. Jack loved all his new playthings. He had a new outlet for his clawing frustration and no longer scratched up furniture or his owner’s legs. His new laser pointer and automated toys helped burned up enough energy that he could actually sleep on her lap and curl up with her at night. After one long day of housework, she sat on the couch to read a book and for the first time he actually wanted to cuddle. He crawled up on her lap, then on her chest to obstruct her view of her book and direct all her attention on him. She was happier in that moment than she had been in a long time. She was finally starting to feel at peace in her home, despite having no job and a house under continuing construction.

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One day, Courtney got a call from one of the companies she had interviewed for. Her heart stopped beating in her chest as she listened intently to the voice on the phone. They offered her the job; amazing pay and outstanding benefits. She grinned from ear to ear and couldn’t believe what she was hearing. This was the best news she had gotten in a long time. They told her to get back to them by the end of the week, but there was nothing to think about. This was what she needed. Finally, her life seemed to be coming back together.

The doorbell rang and she jumped back to the present. *Shit*, she thought. *He’s here.* She ran to the door and took a deep breath before opening it.

“You look great,” Chris smiled on her door step. He wore a striking blue dress shirt and dark blue jeans, and suddenly she felt overdressed in her thin dress and high heels. “You ready?” he asked patiently.

“Yeah,” she blushed as she stood there in a daze. She grabbed her purse and they headed out on their date.

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He had asked her out the day before, and she managed to control herself from leaping with joy and tried to play it cool. They were going out to dinner at a little local place he knew near his house, on the other side of town, but he made the drive and came over to pick her up anyway. *Quite the gentleman*, she thought.

The restaurant was nice and cozy, not crowded at all, and they got a table easily. They talked and laughed over plates of home-style fried food and barbecue, and Courtney tried her best to not look like a total pig in the process. The last thing she wanted was to be caught laughing with a mouth full of food on their first date. At one point, she brought up the good news she had heard earlier that day.

“That’s amazing!” Chris replied. “What’s the job exactly?”

“It’s system analyses, mostly dealing with existing clients’ systems,” she responded with less enthusiasm.

“You like doing that?” he asked with a crook in one brow.

“It’s okay,” she shrugged. “I’ve done it before. It’s not the best work I’ve done but it’ll pay the bills.”

“Don’t you want more in a job?”

She paused for a moment. “Do you like what you do?” she asked somewhat evasively.

A melancholic smile flashed across his face, a smile she hadn’t seen him wear before. “Kinda…” he said. “But if I had the choice I’d probably do something different.”

“Why don’t you have a choice? What would you do?” she asked leaning forward slightly, utensils down as she gave him all her attention.

“I don’t really know…” he let out a small chuckle. “I was raised to take over my dad’s work; I never got to try anything else. But that’s okay, cause I’m useful here. And I like it enough.”

“But I should find something else?” She was confused by what he said and what he did.

“You know what you like,” he stated. “Like, what you genuinely like, what you chose for yourself. So you should try and find that.”

Chris was such a positive and calming force for others – certainly for Courtney – and based on his attitude she had assumed he lived a life of excitement and pleasure. He was enthusiastic and always had a smile on his face, but now she saw him differently. She saw something familiar. He seemed unfulfilled, trapped in a life of contentment, not happiness. He seemed like the kind of person who put the needs of others before himself, pushed others forward in life, and remained to live his own life comfortably. He was content, and didn’t want anything more. Courtney wondered, *If I take this job, will it be the same?*

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“Oh my god…” Courtney murmured to herself as she scanned through the multiple offers her realtor had handed her. She had finished fixing up the house with Chris just last week, and there were already so many people placing bids well above asking price. She was so giddy with excitement she almost screamed. Jack abruptly interrupted her ecstasy with a playful meow that said, “For God’s sake play with me, woman!” She grabbed his laser toy and absentmindedly flicked it back and forth across the new hardwood floor, laughing as Jack clumsily slipped with every turn. She looked around at her updated house and began to think about her next step.

It had been a couple weeks since the great job offer. She was so determined to take it before talking to Chris, and then everything changed. *Do I want to be content, or happy?* These thoughts rattled around in her head for days. She called and consulted her parents, and they told her to “follow her passion.” A cheesy line really, but one good parents will always give their kids.

After thinking about it for a few days, she had decided to turn the job down. She settled on continuing with some freelance work until she found something better, and now, the profits from flipping the house would alleviate her financial stress for awhile.

When she told her parents, they said they’d always welcome her with open arms if she needed a place. She thanked them, but knew she wouldn’t move back in with her family. *Ugh, I’m already a crazy cat lady; I don’t need to be the 30-year-old who lives in her parent’s basement too.*

No, she wouldn’t intrude on them. But that still left the question of where to go from here. She could move back to Atlanta to be closer to them. That’d be nice. She could stay here and get to know Chris better. That’d be nice too. They’d been on a few more dates, and things were going pretty well. But she still wasn’t sure if it was anything serious, or anything she should make a big decision based on.

She felt as though the whole world had opened up before her with possibilities, and she had no clue what she wanted to do or where she wanted to be. And yet, despite facing an unknown future, she wasn’t panicking or overthinking to the point of hysteria. She was facing this challenge with poise and confidence, and she couldn’t help but smile at herself for that.

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She was a little nervous about the plan she landed on, but there was no turning back now. She already bought it, it was already done, and there was no point in freaking out. She knew absolutely nothing about RVs, but as she stood in front of her used Minnie Winnie she felt more excited than scared. It was already packed with all the essentials, and all that was left was to put it in drive and hit the road.

It had been parked in the driveway for the past few days while she got Jack adjusted to their new home. She couldn’t bring his nice big cat tree, but she found some smaller hanging scratchers and hung them on every surface she possibly could. But his most fascinating new toy was his brand new, bright blue harness and leash. He loved it. He was born for the outdoors, and while he probably preferred do his exploring free-range, he was more than happy with this.

Courtney was sitting on her lofty bed playing with Jack when she noticed Chris’s rusty old work truck pull up. *Right on time, punctual as ever,* she thought as she climbed down to greet him. He stood outside with his hands in his pockets as he admired the new massive machinery before him. When he saw her, his eyes crinkled as the biggest smile she’d ever seen crossed his face. There was that twinkle again.

“So,” he said softly. “Ya headin out today?”

She gulped. “Yeah, in just a bit,” she said in almost a whisper.

He took a deep breath and looked at the front door to the house. The house where they met. The house that they repaired together. The house that was now someone else’s.

“I guess our jobs done here,” he said more to himself than to her.

“Yeah,” she said with a soft smile. “Thank you.” She hoped he understood that she meant more than just the house repair.

He smiled and gave her one last hug.

“Good luck. I wish you the best,” he whispered as he squeezed her tighter.

“You too,” she squeaked through the knot in her throat. “The very best.”

She hoped they’d see each other again, but knew that this was probably the last time. She felt guilty for abandoning him after all he’d done for her, but she needed to move on. She didn’t want to be stuck anymore. As sad as it sounded, Courtney knew this was the right decision and that it was going to be okay. Moving forward was just a part of life.

As she stepped up into the RV she heard the distant sound of thunder and perked her head up to see where it was coming from. There were dark clouds rolling in from the west – the same direction she was heading.

“Careful out there,” Chris said. “They saying it’s gonna pour pretty hard.”

It was almost summer, but there was still a chill breeze in the air. She had always thought it was too cold here, that she’d never adjust to anything but the Atlanta heat. Now, she closed her eyes and lifted her chin a little as she let the wind wash over her. The smell of incoming rain was coursing through her veins and invigorating her, and she took a deep breath as she awaited the downpour.

“Don’t worry,” she reassured him. “I actually like the rain.”